

**Wars Within Wars: Understanding Inter-rebel Fighting**

**Costantino Pischedda**

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences  
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY  
2015

© 2015

Costantino Pischedda

All rights reserved

## ABSTRACT

### Wars Within Wars: Understanding Inter-rebel Fighting

Costantino Pischedda

Why do rebel groups frequently fight each other rather than cooperating against their common enemy – the state? This dissertation presents a theory of inter-rebel war and tests it with a combination of case studies and statistical analysis.

The theory conceives of inter-rebel war as a calculated response by rebel groups to opportunities for expansion and threats generated by the civil war environment in which they operate. Insurgent organizations attack weaker coethnic groups when government forces only pose a limited threat (i.e., when they face a window of opportunity), so as to eliminate potentially threatening rivals and acquire more resources to be used against the state. Additionally, rebel groups resort to force in desperate attempts to deal with a mounting threat posed by coethnic groups or a drastic deterioration of their power relative to other groups (i.e., when they face a window of vulnerability).

Rebel groups' cost-benefit calculus about infighting is powerfully influenced by whether they are facing coethnic insurgent organizations. Coethnic rebel groups' overlapping mobilization bases make it possible for an organization to take over the resources (in particular, recruitment pools and tax bases) of defeated rivals and consequently improve their chances in the fight against the government. Thus coethnicity amplifies both defensive and aggressive motives for inter-rebel war.

This dissertation adopts a mixed-method approach, combining case studies and statistical analysis. My three main case studies are the Kurdish rebellions against Iraq (1961-1988), the Eritrean war of national liberation (1961-1991) and the insurgencies in Ethiopia's Tigray province (1975-1991). These case studies combine secondary literature with primary sources collected during fieldwork in Iraq, Ethiopia and several European countries – including fifty-four semi-structured interviews with forty former insurgent leaders, their memoirs, and archival materials.

In order to assess the generalizability of my argument across a variety of historical, geographical and political contexts, I also conducted shadow case studies of the civil wars in Lebanon (1975-89), Sri Lanka (1983-2009) and Syria (2011-), and analyzed an original panel dataset of all dyads of rebel groups pitted against the same government in multi-party civil wars in the period 1989-2011.

## Table of Contents

List of Tables	ii
List of Figures	iii
Acknowledgments	iv
1. Introduction	1
2. Fighting the Wrong Enemy? Windows of Opportunity, Vulnerability, and Inter-rebel War	12
3. The Kurdish Insurgencies in Iraq, 1961-1988	73
4. Insurgencies in Eritrea and Tigray, 1961-1991	125
5. Assessing External Validity with Shadow Case Studies: Lebanon, Sri Lanka and Syria	208
6. Assessing External Validity with Statistical Analysis: Are Coethnic Rebel Groups More Likely to Fight Each Other?	279
7. Conclusions	294
Bibliography	308
Appendix 1: List of Interviewees	346
Appendix 2: Robustness Checks for Statistical Analysis	351

## List of Tables

Table 3.1: Summary of the findings of the Kurdish insurgencies in Iraq	111
Table 4.1: Summary of the findings of the insurgencies in Tigray and Eritrea	194
Table 6.1: Descriptive statistics	285
Table 6.2: Testing the coethnicity argument (I)	287
Table 6.3: Testing the coethnicity argument (II)	288
Table 6.4: Changes in the probability of inter-rebel war using Clarify	290
Table 6.5: Testing minimum winning coalition theory	291
Table 7.1: Summary of inter-rebel wars by type and outcome	296
Table A2.1: Robustness to alternative measures of government strength and threat	352
Table A2.2: Robustness checks with number of rebel groups	353
Table A2.3: Robustness to alternative measures of the inter-rebel balance of power (I)	355
Table A2.4: Robustness to alternative measures of the inter-rebel balance of power (II)	356
Table A2.5: Robustness to alternative measures of external support	357
Table A2.6: Robustness to alternative measures of territorial control and hegemonic war	359

## List of Figures

Figure 2.1: Theory of inter-rebel war	46
Figure 3.1: Map of Iraqi Kurdistan	80
Figure 3.2: Timeline of inter-rebel war in Iraqi Kurdistan	85
Figure 3.3: Maximum extent of Kurdish rebels' territorial control	112
Figure 4.1: Map of Eritrea and Tigray	126
Figure 4.2: Map of Eritrea	137
Figure 4.3: Timeline of inter-rebel war in Eritrea	140
Figure 4.4.: Map of Ethiopia	143
Figure 4.5: Timeline of inter-rebel war in Tigray	144
Figure 5.1: Map of Lebanon	220
Figure 5.2: Zones of Military Influence in Lebanon, 1976-1982	235
Figure 5.3: Map of Sri Lanka	250
Figure 5.4: Map of Syria	262

## Acknowledgments

I am deeply indebted to many people and institutions for their crucial intellectual, emotional, financial and logistical support while I was writing this dissertation.

The members of my dissertation committee in the Department of Political Science at Columbia University provided constructive and insightful feedback at multiple stages of the project. Jack Snyder was a model advisor – genuinely committed to the independent intellectual development of his mentees, while always generous with his time and ideas. Page Fortna relentlessly spurred me to be systematic and rigorous in spelling out the logic of my arguments and in bringing empirical evidence to bear on them. Prof. Jervis’ (I think I am allowed to call him Bob now that I completed the PhD) work, courses and comments on the dissertation manuscript have been a major source of inspiration and stimulus to think more deeply about international relations and strategic interactions in civil war settings, in particular. I benefited enormously from tapping into Austin Long’s expertise on insurgency and counterinsurgency. Last but not least, I am thankful to Daniel Corstange: he joined the committee relatively late in the game but his thoughtful criticisms have given me much food for thought.

Among Columbia’s faculty more broadly, I owe a special debt of gratitude to Prof. Betts and Massimo Morelli. Prof. Betts contributed to shape my thinking about war years before I met him, when I read his *International Security* essay “Is Strategy an Illusion?”. After taking his courses and serving as his teaching assistant multiple times, I continue to be amazed by his strategic wisdom whenever I read his work. Massimo Morelli has been an intellectual guide, a colleague and a close friend at the same time; he crucially enabled my field research in Iraq (and thus this dissertation) by involving me in a project of his in the country. Tanisha Fazal also generously provided valuable comments on an earlier draft of my theory chapter.

At Columbia, I had the good fortune to meet a group of talented young scholars that graced me with their friendship. Graduate school would not have been as formative an intellectual and human experience without Sara Moller, Kelsey Finkel, Dianne Pfundstein, Bjorn Gomes, Andrew Cheon, Laura Vargas, Erica Borghard, Joe Brown, Melissa Valle, Stefano Recchia, Mark Schneider, Andreas Avgousti, Matias Mednik and Ben Schupmann. Matias also generously provided invaluable help in creating the dataset used in the Chapter 6 of the dissertation. Over the years Andreas has offered selfless friendship and support towards me, which I hope to be able to match one day.

Outside Columbia, Peter Krause, Morgan Kaplan, Lee Seymour and Paul Staniland provided exceptionally helpful and detailed comments on drafts of several chapters of the dissertation. I am also thankful to Joan Ricart, Andrea Gilli and Mauro Gilli for engaging discussions and useful suggestions. Alan Kuperman radically strengthened my interest in the rigorous study of civil wars during my Master’s at the Johns Hopkins University’s School of International Advanced International Studies (SAIS) over ten years ago and (much to my surprise at the time) strongly supported my decision to pursue a PhD.

My fieldwork in Iraq and Ethiopia would not have been possible without the help of the individuals – too many to mention here – that put me in touch with interviewees, helped arrange



interviews and worked as interpreters. I am also extremely grateful to the interviewees themselves for their time and for sharing with me their civil war experiences.

The Smith Richardson Foundation generously financed my field research in Ethiopia through the World Politics and Statecraft Fellowship.

Finally, I will be forever grateful to my mother, my sister and father; their unwavering love helped get through several dark moments on the way to the PhD.

I dedicate this dissertation to my mother Mattia Pericu and to the memory of my friend Giancarlo Doria, two extraordinary individuals that have taught me much more than I could ever learn from books.

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

In early January 2014, the news media were abuzz with reports of large-scale clashes between Sunni rebel groups taking part in the Syrian civil war, which had started over two years earlier when the government cracked down on peaceful protestors. Pundits were quick to point out that the Alawite-dominated regime of Bashar al-Assad would be the ultimate beneficiary. Analysts Bill Roggio and Lisa Lundquist, for example, noted that “rebel infighting is a boon to regime forces and clearly detrimental to the overall strength of the Syrian opposition.”<sup>1</sup> This initial assessment was confirmed by subsequent developments, as the government made major gains in the following months as inter-rebel war dragged on.<sup>2</sup>

Analyses of the causes of the infighting, however, were not as insightful as the predictions of its consequences. The initial narrative of “moderate” rebel groups fighting against the ruthless jihadi organization known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) became untenable as evidence emerged that the anti-ISIS coalition included several Salafist organizations and even al-Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra.<sup>3</sup> Why would rebel groups sharing ethno-

---

<sup>1</sup> Bill Roggio and Lisa Lundquist, “Analysis: Shifting Dynamics of Rebel Infighting in Syria,” *Long War Journal*, 17 January, 2014 (available at [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/01/analysis\\_shifting\\_dy.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/01/analysis_shifting_dy.php), last accessed on June 24, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Liz Sly, “On Third Anniversary of Syrian Rebellion, Assad Is Steadily Winning the War,” *Washington Post*, 14 March, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Sam Dagher and Maria Abi-Habib, “Fighting Among Rebels Boosts Syrian Regime,” *Wall Street Journal*, 13 January, 2014.

sectarian identities and religious ideology divert resources from their common struggle against a powerful foe to fight each other?

Contemporary history is replete with instances of inter-rebel fighting. For example, during the Algerian war of national liberation against the French, the National Liberation Front (FLN) systematically targeted its local competitor, the Algerian National Movement (MNA). In more recent times, the Tamil Tigers wiped out rival Tamil groups waging guerrilla warfare against the Sri Lankan government, and Kashmir's pro-Pakistan insurgents destroyed the pro-independence Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) as they were all fighting against Indian security forces. The clashes between al-Qaeda in Iraq and Anbar's local rebel groups in the mid-2000s are perhaps the episode of inter-rebel violence that has attracted the most attention in media and policy circles, due to the involvement of US forces in the war and the fact that it may have contributed to the turn of events leading to a reduction of insurgent activity in the country.<sup>4</sup>

This dissertation presents a theory of inter-rebel war – large-scale combat between organizations taking part in armed struggle against the state – and tests it with a combination of case studies (based on a variety of sources, including interviews with former insurgent leaders conducted by the author) and statistical analysis. In a nutshell, the theory conceives of inter-rebel war as a rational, calculated response by rebel groups to opportunities for expansion and threats generated by the civil war environment in which they operate. Insurgent organizations attack weaker coethnic groups when the incumbent only poses a limited threat, so as to eliminate potentially threatening rivals and acquire more resources to be used against the government.

---

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Jon Lindsay and Austin Long, "Counterinsurgency Theory and Stabilization of Iraq's Anbar," working paper, 2009; and Stephen Biddle, Jeffrey A. Friedman and Jacob N. Shapiro, "Testing the Surge: Why did Violence Decline in Iraq in 2007?" *International Security* 37 (1), 2012: 1-34.

Additionally, rebel groups resort to force in desperate attempts to deal with a mounting threat posed by coethnic groups or a drastic deterioration of their power relative to other groups.

Rebel groups' cost-benefit calculus about infighting is powerfully influenced by whether they are facing coethnic insurgent organizations. Coethnic rebel groups' overlapping mobilization bases make it possible for an organization to take over the resources (in particular, recruitment pools and tax bases) of defeated rivals and consequently improve their chances in the fight against the government. Thus coethnicity amplifies both defensive and aggressive motives for inter-rebel war.

### **1. The Puzzle and Limits of Existing Explanations**

The occurrence of inter-rebel war is puzzling from several theoretical points of view. Rational calculations based on power and interest should dissuade rebel groups from diverting scarce resources from the struggle against their common enemy. In particular, balance of power logic should push rebel groups to ally against the incumbent, as it is usually the strongest civil war belligerent. These strategic considerations should be reinforced by the enhanced social cohesion in the rebel camp brought about by the shared experience of violence at the hands of the government. This effect should be especially strong when the government and the rebels belong to different ethnic groups, as ethnic violence "hardens" identities and deepens inter-ethnic hostility and fears.

Recent scholarship in International Relations and Comparative Politics has shed much light on a broad range of civil war dynamics, but we still lack compelling explanations of inter-rebel war. In the only published large-N study specifically on the topic, Hanne Fjelde and Desirée Nilsson find that insurgent groups are more likely to be involved in inter-rebel war when

they are either strong or weak relative to other groups; they have exclusive control of a part of the country's territory; they fight in areas with drug cultivation; and when the government's political authority is weak.<sup>5</sup> However, these are, in a sense, correlations in search for a theory, as the findings are not integrated in an overarching explanation of inter-rebel violence.

Fotini Christia has advanced perhaps the most comprehensive and elegant theoretical explanation for civil war alliances, with clear implications for inter-rebel war.<sup>6</sup> She argues that alliances follow a minimum winning coalition (MWC) logic, i.e., belligerents strive to be part of an alliance large enough to win the war but as small as possible given the requirement of being on the winning side. When the MWC threshold is passed, one or more belligerents will abandon the dominant coalition in search for an optimally-sized one. However, Christia's work has some empirical limits. Most crucially for my purposes, the groups involved in all the episodes of inter-rebel violence mentioned earlier faced an overwhelmingly powerful government. Because they did not constitute a MWC, the insurgents should have refrained from fighting each other. Thus MWC theory does not represent a satisfactory solution to the puzzle of inter-rebel war.

Building on these important recent contributions, this dissertation aims to fill this gap in the literature.

## **2. The Stakes for Policy**

Unraveling the puzzle of inter-rebel war is not only important for theoretical reasons; it also has crucial policy implications. Policymakers will typically want to have a sense of the probability of

---

<sup>5</sup> Hanne Fjelde and Desirée Nilsson, "Rebels against Rebels: Explaining Violence between Rebel Groups," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56 (4), 2012: 604-28.

<sup>6</sup> Fotini Christia, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012). Civil war alliances and inter-rebel war are related but distinct phenomena. Two rebel groups may not cooperate and thus not form an alliance but may also abstain from fighting each other. However, arguments that make predictions about rebel alliances typically imply predictions about inter-rebel fighting, as allies are expected not to fight each other.

inter-rebel fighting and of what policies could be adopted to induce cooperation or conflict between rebels when deciding about intervention in ongoing civil wars. Going back to the example with which this chapter opened, the linchpin of President's Obama strategy against ISIS is the idea that US intervention could promote violent conflict between that organization and other Sunni Arab armed groups in Iraq and Syria.<sup>7</sup> By contrast, in the early 1990s forging an alliance between Bosnia's Muslims and Croats was a key element of the US intervention strategy in that civil war, ultimately aiming to put pressure on the Serbs to negotiate.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, inter-rebel violence may lead to insurgent side-switching, as the group being defeated turns to the government for help.<sup>9</sup> Insurgent "defection" not only entails a shift of military resources between opposing sides, but also often provides the government with precious intelligence on the groups that continue to oppose it and thus can have a substantial impact on counterinsurgency outcomes.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Kimberly Kagan, Frederik W. Kagan and Jessica D. Lewis, "A Strategy to Defeat the Islamic State," *Middle East Security Report* 23, Institute for the Study of War, 2014. The earlier policy debate on the merits of intervention in Syria, instead, emphasized the risk of inter-rebel fighting as an obstacle to an anti-Assad campaign (see, e.g., Kenneth M. Pollack, "How, When and Whether to End the War in Syria," *Washington Post*, 10 August, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Steven L. Burg and Paul S. Shoup, *The War in Bosnia Herzegovina: Ethnic Conflict and International Intervention* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1999, pp. 292-8).

<sup>9</sup> Paul Staniland, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Insurgent Fratricide, Ethnic Defection, and the Rise of Pro-State Paramilitaries," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56 (1), 2012a: 16-40.

<sup>10</sup> This point is well illustrated by insurgencies in Iraq and Sri Lanka. In the first case, the decision by Anbar province's local rebels to side with US and Iraqi security forces against their erstwhile ally – al-Qaeda in Iraq – marked a key turning point in the counterinsurgency campaign, paving the road to a substantial reduction in insurgent activity in the province and in the rest of the country (Lindsay and Long 2009; Biddle, Friedman and Shapiro 2012). The Tamil Tigers' eastern commander's "flip" in 2004 facilitated the subsequent offensive by the Sri Lankan army, culminating in the Tigers' complete defeat in 2009, after almost thirty years of intermittent fighting and negotiations (Ashok Mehta, "Sri Lanka's Ethnic Conflict: How Eelam War IV was Won," *Manekshaw Paper* 22, Centre for Land Warfare Studies, CLAWS, 2010, New Delhi).

### 3. Window Theory of Inter-rebel War and Contribution to the Literature

My argument combines a power-driven, strategic logic of interaction in an anarchic environment with the idea that ethnic identities shape rebel groups' calculations and threat perception. Inter-rebel war occurs when groups face “windows of opportunity” or “windows of vulnerability.”<sup>11</sup>

Windows of opportunity emerge when a rebel group is in a position of clear military superiority over another group (or groups) directly competing for the same pool of resources – namely, the same ethno-national community – and the government does not pose an immediate and serious threat, even if it is much stronger in terms of aggregate military power. Under these circumstances, the stronger rebel organization will be tempted to launch a hegemonic bid – i.e., use overwhelming force to get rid of (or significantly weaken) coethnic rivals. The combination of favorable imbalance of power and limited government threat holds the prospect of achieving hegemony in the rebel camp at relatively low costs and risks. And getting rid of coethnic organizations entails significant benefits for rebel groups, which can be ultimately traced to ethnic parochialism, i.e., *individuals'* tendency to cooperate with and favor members of one's ethnic group. Given their overlapping popular bases and comparable ethno-national credentials, the victor can expect to be able to absorb a large chunk of the resources previously under the control of defeated rivals (including potential recruits and financial and logistical support networks), thus strengthening its position vis-à-vis the government. Moreover, as coethnic rebel groups aspire to control the same population and territories and may expect to do so with relative ease once they achieve a hegemonic position, they represent potential threats to each other. Success in inter-rebel war, therefore, can improve the threat environment of the group that emerges on top. By contrast, the victor of a fight between non-coethnic organizations would

---

<sup>11</sup> See Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), pp. 73-104, for a discussion of “windows” as causes of interstate war.

likely be perceived as an alien presence by the base of support of a defeated rebel group and thus have a hard time with recruitment and extraction activities, forcing it to devote substantial resources to policing the population, to the point that rebel hegemony may result in a net drain on the organization's resources.

Windows of vulnerability arise when a rebel group faces the clear prospect of a dramatic deterioration of its power relative to other groups or a mounting threat posed by a coethnic rival. If no other option appears viable, the organization may be tempted to resort to force against the rival or start a course of action entailing a high risk of inter-rebel war, in a desperate attempt to turn the tables. I call this typology of inter-rebel war “gambling for resurrection,” which has been defined as “an attempt to maintain power by inducing massive change in the environment which has only a small chance of succeeding.”<sup>12</sup>

This dissertation situates itself in a growing body of works on civil war processes at the “meso-level”. By focusing on rebel organizations as central actors it contributes to bridging the gap between micro analyses of individuals and local communities affected by armed conflict and macro studies at the country- or ethnic-group level.<sup>13</sup>

The argument's key moving parts – power and ethno-national identity – are common to many civil war studies, but they are conceptualized and combined in distinctive ways, with far reaching theoretical implications. Unlike most civil war studies that adopt some variant of balance of power logic, this dissertation conceptualizes belligerents' power as both dynamic and

---

<sup>12</sup> Rui de Figueiredo and Barry R. Weingast, “The Rationality of Fear: Political Opportunism and Ethnic Conflict,” in Barbara F. Walter and Jack L. Snyder, eds., *Civil Wars, Insecurity, and Intervention* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 263. The classic International Relations reference for gambling for resurrection is George W. Downs and David M. Rocke, *Optimal Imperfection? Domestic Uncertainty and Institutions in International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

<sup>13</sup> Rogers Brubaker, “Ethnicity Without Groups,” *European Journal of Sociology* 43 (2), 2002: 163-89; Laia Balcells and Patricia Justino, “Bridging Micro and Macro Approaches on Civil Wars and Political Violence: Issues, Challenges, and the Way Forward,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 58 (8), 2014: 1343-59.



contextual. Insurgents start operating from a position of weakness vis-à-vis the incumbent, but they expect to grow as they conduct political and military activities. As David Galula writes, “[t]he protracted nature of a revolutionary war does not result from a design by either side; it is imposed on the insurgent by his initial weakness.”<sup>14</sup> My argument views infighting as one of the processes through which rebel groups can become stronger (in this case, by acquiring resources controlled by defeated coethnic rivals). Contrary to standard balance of power thinking, inter-rebel war in a context in which the government is militarily much stronger than the insurgents may enable a rebel group’s growth without exposing it to an unacceptably higher risk of being wiped out. This is because the incumbent’s power is contextual: its superior aggregate military resources do not automatically translate into ability or willingness to project decisive force at short notice anywhere in the country’s territory. Political, military and logistical constraints may limit government power projection, so that the incumbent may not represent a serious and immediate threat to the rebels groups fighting each other.

The notion that coethnicity increases the risk of inter-rebel war by shaping rebel groups’ growth prospects and threat perception challenges two prevalent views of the effects of ethnic identity on civil war processes. The first one sees coethnicity as a source of inter-rebel solidarity and cooperation,<sup>15</sup> while the second one considers identities as epiphenomenal – a façade for narrow material calculations, not an important causal force.<sup>16</sup> By contrast, I argue that

---

<sup>14</sup> David Galula, *Counter-insurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: Praeger, 1964), p. 8. For very similar observations, see Bell, J. Bowyer, “The Armed Struggle and Underground Intelligence: An Overview,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 17 (2), 1994: 115-50, in particular p. 115; and Daniel Byman, *Understanding Proto-Insurgency* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2007), p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> Barry R. Posen, “The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict,” *Survival* 31 (1), 1993: 27-37; Chaim D. Kaufmann, “Possible and Impossible Solutions to Ethnic Civil Wars,” *International Security* 20 (4), 1996: 136-75.

coethnicity powerfully shapes rebel groups' behavior, providing strong incentives for inter-group aggression rather than cooperation.

#### **4. Empirical Approach**

This dissertation adopts a mixed-method approach, combining case studies and statistical analysis. The bulk of the evidentiary burden lies on in-depth case studies, because testing my argument requires fine-grained and contextual measures of relative power and threat, which are exceedingly hard to code for a large number of cases over time. My three main case studies are the Kurdish insurgencies against Iraq (1961-1988), the Eritrean war of national liberation (1961-1991) and the rebellions in Ethiopia's Tigray province (1975-1991). These case studies combine secondary literature with primary sources collected during fieldwork in Iraq, Ethiopia and several European countries – including fifty-four semi-structured interviews with forty former insurgent leaders, their memoirs and archival materials. I chose the Iraq case for theory development as it meets the deviant and diverse case criteria – it displays a pattern of inter-rebel fighting that extant theories cannot explain and full variation on the dependent variable (inter-rebel war). I selected the Eritrea and Tigray cases for theory testing due to their substantial variation on the dependent variable and the fact that their combination offers a chance to test qualitatively the coethnicity part of my argument – the two neighboring provinces experienced multiparty ethnic rebellions, with insurgent groups having interactions, and thus opportunities for conflict, both within and across ethnic communities.

As a preliminary assessment of the generalizability of my argument across a variety of historical, geographical and political contexts, I also conducted shadow case studies based on

---

<sup>16</sup> Stathis Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Christia 2012.

secondary literature of the civil wars in Lebanon (1975-89), Sri Lanka (1983-2009) and Syria (2011-). All three are multi-party civil wars fought along ethnic lines with multiple episodes of inter-rebel fighting, thus offering several opportunities for within-case controlled comparisons; each of them has also distinct benefits. Lebanon's civil war is an especially useful case to test the coethnicity hypothesis, as it features both coethnic and non-coethnic armed groups operating in close proximity and thus with opportunities to fight each other; the Syrian civil war allows me to assess whether window theory sheds light on the behavior of jihadi groups, a relatively common presence in post-9-11 civil wars; and the Tamil insurgency offers an opportunity to assess the performance of the argument beyond Africa and the Middle East broadly defined, where all of my other cases are located.

Finally, I use an original panel dataset of all dyads of rebel groups pitted against the same government in a multi-party civil war in the period 1989-2011 to further assess the external validity of window theory. In particular, I test the argument's observable implication that, other things being equal, coethnic rebel dyads should be more likely to experience infighting.

## **5. Plan of the Dissertation**

The remainder of the dissertation is structured as follows. Chapter 2 presents the window theory of inter-rebel war, elaborating on the constitutive elements of windows of opportunity and vulnerability. Particular attention is devoted to how coethnicity affects rebel groups' cost-benefit calculus about infighting. This chapter also details my dissertation's research design, discussing the argument's scope conditions, case selection strategy and challenges involved in tracing insurgent decision-making by interviewing former rebel leaders. Chapter 3 presents the theory-development case study of the Kurdish insurgencies against Iraq. Through detailed processes-

tracing of insurgent leaders' decision making, it shows how intra-Kurdish competition for overlapping bases of support and the opening of windows of opportunity and vulnerability caused multiple episodes of inter-rebel war. The following chapter – Chapter 4 – presents case studies of the insurgencies in the Ethiopian provinces of Eritrea and Tigray. It tests my argument about windows of opportunity and vulnerability by tracing rebel groups' decision-making processes and shows that the mechanisms of intense competition for control of territory and populations that led to intra-ethnic rebel war were absent in interactions between non-coethnic rebel groups.

The following two chapters assess the external validity of window theory with shadow case studies based on secondary literature and statistical analysis, respectively. Chapter 5 contains case studies of the civil war in Lebanon, the Tamil insurgency against Sri Lanka and Syria's ongoing civil war; collectively, their findings reveal how window theory can explain broad patterns of inter-rebel war in a variety of geopolitical contexts. Through an analysis of a panel dataset of all dyads of rebel groups in multi-party civil wars between 1989 and 2011, Chapter 6 demonstrates that coethnic rebels are more likely to clash.

Chapter 7 concludes the dissertation by summarizing its main findings, discussing the argument's relation with Realist theories of international politics and drawing policy implications for counterinsurgency and external intervention in civil wars.

## Chapter 2

### Fighting the Wrong Enemy? Windows of Opportunity, Vulnerability, and Inter-rebel War

We must not fight two-sided; it is better to fight one-sided.  
- Mao Tse-tung

#### 1. Introduction

Why do rebel groups sometimes fight each other as they are also battling against the government? I argue that inter-rebel war occurs when groups face “windows of opportunity” or “windows of vulnerability.” Windows of opportunity are situations in which a rebel group is markedly more powerful than its coethnic rival(s) and the government (even if much stronger in terms of aggregate military power) does not pose an immediate and serious threat. Under these circumstances, the stronger rebel organization will be tempted to launch a hegemonic bid – i.e., use overwhelming force to get rid of or significantly weaken a coethnic rival (or rivals).

Windows of vulnerability arise when a rebel group faces the clear prospect of a dramatic deterioration of its position in the inter-rebel balance of power or a mounting threat posed by a coethnic rival. If no other option appears viable, the organization may be tempted to resort to use force against the rival(s) or start a course of action entailing a high risk of inter-rebel war, in a desperate attempt to turn the tables. I call this typology of inter-rebel war “gambling for resurrection.”

This chapter is organized as follows. The next section sets up the puzzle of inter-rebel war from various theoretical perspectives. Section 3 presents my argument, detailing the features of windows of opportunity and vulnerability that cause inter-rebel war. Section 4 discusses my

empirical approach, focusing in particular on the argument's scope conditions, issues related to process-tracing based on interviews with former insurgent leaders, case selection strategy and operationalization of key variables. Section 5 concludes by summarizing my argument and laying out the road map for the following empirical chapters.

## **2. The Puzzle of Inter-rebel War**

The fact of rebel groups fighting each other and thus diverting scarce resources from the struggle against a common (and usually stronger) enemy – the government – is puzzling from several theoretical points of view. A key insight from the sociology of conflict is that conflict with out-groups tends to increase in-group cohesion. In as much as we can think of the rebel organizations as constituting an anti-government social group or movement, we should expect its members to abstain from fighting one another (and even cooperate).<sup>17</sup> This should be especially the case when the government and the rebels belong to different ethnic groups, as the experience of violence at the hand of the ethnic-other is often seen as leading to “hardening” of identities and deepening of ethnic hostility and fear.<sup>18</sup>

Rational calculations based on power and interest, epitomized by the adage “the enemy of my enemy is my friend,” point in the same direction. In particular, balance of power logic in

---

<sup>17</sup> Georg Simmel, *Conflict: The Web of Group Affiliations* (Glencoe, ILL.: Free Press, 1955); Lewis A. Coser, *The Functions of Social Conflict* (New York: Free Press, 1956). Coser points out that the group-binding effect of conflict is conditional on the pre-existing degree of group cohesion and on whether the external threat affects the group as a whole. For a good (albeit outdated) review of sociological, anthropological, psychological and political science literature on the topic, see Arthur A. Stein, “Conflict and Cohesion: A Review of the Literature,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 20 (1), 1976: 143–72. For a review of the experimental evidence that in-group cohesion and solidarity increase in the presence of inter-group conflict, see Gary Bornstein, “Intergroup Conflict: Individual, Group, and Collective Interests,” *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 7 (2), 2003: 129-45.

<sup>18</sup> The classic reference is Chaim D. Kaufmann, “Possible and Impossible Solutions to Ethnic Civil Wars,” *International Security* 20 (4), 1996: 136-75; for a critique, see Stathis Kalyvas, “Ethnic Defection in Civil War,” *Comparative Political Studies* 41 (8), 2008: 1043-68). For micro-level evidence (on Rwanda), see Omar Shahbudin McDoom, “The Psychology of Threat in Intergroup Conflict: Emotions, Rationality, and Opportunity in the Rwandan Genocide,” *International Security* 37 (2), 2012: 119-55.

International Relations would lead us to expect rebel groups to ally against the government, as it is usually the strongest civil war belligerent: inter-rebel squabbling should be set aside until the government's threat recedes.<sup>19</sup> Strategic considerations are typically reinforced by the psychological need for consistency, which pushes individuals to develop positive attitudes towards people they cooperate with for material advantage (i.e., *allies* tend to become *friends*).<sup>20</sup> Finally, inter-rebel violence is puzzling because it may entail image costs for the insurgents before domestic and international audiences. Actual and potential supporters at home and abroad may be disheartened by the occurrence of incomprehensible internecine violence in the rebel camp, while the government may be better able to resist international pressure to address the grievances voiced by the rebels by pointing out that the insurgents are themselves divided and claiming that the government-rebels cleavage is not the main axis of violence.

Scholars and practitioners familiar with the cases discussed in this dissertation may not find the occurrence of inter-rebel violence puzzling at all, as their expectations about “normal” patterns are shaped by knowledge of the corresponding fratricide-ridden histories rather than abstract theory.<sup>21</sup> In any event, different priors about the normalcy and pervasiveness of inter-rebel fighting do not eliminate the fact that phenomenon displays cross- and within-case variation: some rebel dyads experience large-scale inter-rebel fighting while others do not, and

---

<sup>19</sup> Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1979). “Balance of threat” theory suggests the same conclusion: the very fact that the rebels and government are fighting implies the insurgents perceive a non-trivial degree of hostility in the government's intentions, which, coupled with its military superiority, should make the government appear as the most serious threat; see Stephen Walt, *Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987).

<sup>20</sup> Robert Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 230-2.

<sup>21</sup> Paul Staniland refers to inter-rebel violence between coethnic insurgent groups as “fratricide” (“Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Insurgent Fratricide, Ethnic Defection, and the Rise of Pro-State Paramilitaries,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56 (1), 2012a: 16-40). The term itself implies a deviation from “normal” behavior.

insurgent groups clash against each other in some phases of a civil war, but peacefully coexist in others. This variation begs for an explanation.

Recent additions to the burgeoning literature on civil war processes have cast light on several aspects of inter-rebel dynamics, including the related phenomena of inter-rebel violence, civil war alliances and insurgent collaboration with the government.<sup>22</sup> Yet, despite their important contributions, these studies do not provide entirely satisfactory answers to the question motivating this dissertation on theoretical or empirical grounds.<sup>23</sup> In the only published large-N study explicitly on the topic, Hanne Fjelde and Desirée Nilsson present statistical correlations on inter-rebel fighting, finding that rebel groups are more likely to clash when they are either strong or weak relative to each other, they have exclusive control of a part of the country's territory, they fight in areas with drug cultivation and when government political authority is weak.<sup>24</sup> However, these are, in a sense, correlations in search for a theory, as the findings are not integrated in an overarching explanation of inter-rebel violence.

---

<sup>22</sup> Relevant works, besides those that I discuss below, include: Adria Lawrence, "Triggering Nationalist Violence: Competition and Conflict in Uprisings against Colonial Rule," *International Security* 35 (2), 2010: 88–122; Theodore McLaughlin and Wendy Pearlman, "Out-Group Conflict, In-Group Unity? Exploring the Effect of Repression on Intramovement Cooperation," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56 (1), 2012: 41-66; Kristin M. Bakke, Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham and Lee J. M. Seymour. "A Plague of Initials: Fragmentation, Cohesion and Infighting in Civil Wars," *Perspectives on Politics* 10 (2), 2012: 265-83; Havard Mogleiv Nygard and Michael Weintraub, "Bargaining between Rebel Groups and the Outside Option of Violence," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 2015 (forthcoming); Morgan L. Kaplan, "How Civilian Perceptions Affect Patterns of Violence and Competition in Multi-Party Insurgencies," 2013, article manuscript, University of Chicago; Lee Seymour, "Alignment in Civil Wars: Rivalry, Patronage and Side Switching in Sudan," *International Security* 39 (2), 2014: 92-131.

<sup>23</sup> My project also contributes to an emerging literature that looks at the effects of the structure of insurgent movements – in particular the distribution of power within them and the presence of a "rebel hegemon" – on the probability of victory against the government (Peter Krause, "The Structure of Success: How the Internal Distribution of Power Drives Armed Group Behavior and National Movement Effectiveness," *International Security* 38 (3), 2014: 72-116). By specifying the conditions under which hegemonic bids are likely to occur, my argument suggests an answer to questions about the causes of the emergence of different types of insurgent movement structures.

<sup>24</sup> Hanne Fjelde and Desirée Nilsson, "Rebels against Rebels: Explaining Violence between Rebel Groups," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56 (4), 2012: 604-28. In an unpublished paper, Kristine Eck reports similar findings ("Fighting Our Friends Instead of Our Enemies," working paper, 2010).



Other studies focus on rebel alliances, a dependent variable closely related to inter-rebel war, as insurgent groups that are expected to be in an alliance are also expected not to fight each other. Navin Bapat and Kanisha Bond develop a formal model according to which very weak rebel groups are shunned from rebel alliances, because they cannot commit not to defect to the government under intense military pressure; but third-party state supporters can mitigate these concerns by threatening to punish defectors, thus facilitating the inclusion of weak groups in rebel alliances.<sup>25</sup> The implication for inter-rebel war is clear: rebel dyads including a weak organization should be less likely to experience infighting when they have an external sponsor compared to when they do not. The authors support their theoretical claims with a statistical analysis of rebel dyads in the post-World War II era, but the fact that they do not provide case study evidence reduces our confidence that the observed correlations reflect causal relations, in particular given that the quantitative analysis relies on a very rough measure of rebel groups' power.<sup>26</sup>

Fotini Christia has advanced perhaps the most comprehensive and elegant theoretical explanation for civil war alliances.<sup>27</sup> She argues that alliances follow a minimum winning coalition (MWC) logic, i.e., belligerents strive to be part of an alliance large enough to win the war but as small as possible given the requirement of being on the winning side, both to maximize their shares of the spoils of victory and reduce their vulnerability to strong allies.

---

<sup>25</sup> Navin A. Bapat and Kanisha D. Bond, "Alliances between Militant Groups," *British Journal of Political Science* 42 (4), 2012: 793-824.

<sup>26</sup> The power variable is drawn from the non-state actor dataset and measures groups' strength relative to the government (David Cunningham, Kristian Gleditsch and Idean Salehyan, "It Takes Two: A Dyadic Analysis of Civil War Duration and Outcome," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 53 (4), 2009: 570-97). The problem with this variable is that it is largely time-invariant in the dataset, but it is used to explain variation of alliance behavior over time and across rebel dyads.

<sup>27</sup> Fotini Christia, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

When the MWC threshold is passed, one or more belligerents will abandon the dominant coalition in search for an optimally-sized one. The implication for inter-rebel war is that it should occur only when an insurgent group or coalition of a subset of groups is stronger than the government.

However, Christia's work has some empirical limits. Most crucially for my purposes, it is easy to come by well-known instances of rebel groups fighting each other while facing an unambiguously more powerful government.<sup>28</sup> For example, at the beginning of the Algerian war of independence, the National Liberation Front (FLN) wiped out its rival, the National Algerian Movement (MNA), despite the fact that it was facing an overwhelmingly more powerful foe – the French army.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, the National Front for the Liberation of Angola (FLNA) and the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) fought each other from the beginning of the anti-Portuguese struggle rather than cooperating against the vastly superior incumbent.<sup>30</sup> This pattern is not limited to anti-colonial armed conflicts. For example, besides the cases analyzed in the following chapters, the massive military power of the Indian state did not deter Kashmir's pro-Pakistan insurgent groups from targeting the pro-independence Jammu and

---

<sup>28</sup> For more thorough discussions of Christia's argument and empirical findings, see the reviews of her book (including my own) in *H-Diplo/ISSF Roundtable Reviews* 6 (2), 2013.

<sup>29</sup> The bulk of the fighting between FLN and MNA in Algeria occurred in the years 1955-1957. By 1956 the French had deployed 400,000 troops, while the FLN's ranks included 15-20,000 regulars; the MNA was probably always weaker than the FLN (Alistair Horne, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954-1962*, London: Macmillan, 1977, pp. 136 and 222; Rasmus Alenius Boserup, "Collective Violence and Counter-state Building", in Bruce Kapferer and Bjorn Enge Bertelsen, eds., *Crisis of the State: War and Social Upheaval*, New York: Berghahn Books, 2009, pp. 249-50).

<sup>30</sup> John H. Marcum, *The Angolan Revolution: Exile Politics and Guerrilla Warfare (1962-1976)* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1978), pp. 9-61.

Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF).<sup>31</sup> Thus MWC theory does not represent a satisfactory solution to the puzzle motivating this project.

### **3. Theory of Inter-rebel War: Windows of Opportunity and Vulnerability**

Rebel groups exist in an anarchic environment. Much like states in a Realist world, insurgent organizations have to rely on themselves and cooperation with other self-regarding actors for survival and achievement of desired goals: there is no overarching authority to ensure order and enforce agreements. The anarchic characterization is even more fitting for civil war environments than for the international system: in civil wars, the balance of power game is played especially hard, with participants frequently getting “pushed by the wayside” in Kenneth Waltz’ parlance; by contrast, state death in the international system is a rare occurrence.<sup>32</sup>

Standard balance of power logic would lead us to expect rebel groups to be natural allies given that they typically face a stronger common enemy.<sup>33</sup> The incumbent’s overwhelming

---

<sup>31</sup> Staniland 2012a, pp. 25-6; Navnita Chadha Behera, *Demystifying Kashmir* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2006), p. 167.

<sup>32</sup> Others have noted that the effects of anarchy are especially pernicious in civil war settings (see Barbara F. Walter, “The Critical Barrier to Civil War Settlement,” *International Organization* 51 (3), 1997: 335–64, in particular pp. 338–40; and Christia 2012, p. 51). Tanisha Fazal identifies nine instances of state death (defined as the formal loss of foreign policymaking power to another state) in the years 1946–1992, only two of which occurred through interstate war and conquest (South Vietnam in 1975 and Kuwait in 1990) (“State Death in the International System,” *International Organization* 58 (2), 2004: 311–44, in particular p. 320). The picture changes only marginally if one broadens the focus to consider foreign-imposed regime changes: in the years 1946–2004, there were 18 such events (including the two violent state deaths mentioned above) (Hein Goemans, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch and Giacomo Chiozza, “Introducing Archigos: A Data Set of Political Leaders,” *Journal of Peace Research* 46 (2), 2009: 269–83). By contrast, rebel groups frequently experience violent death, which I define as a condition, induced by the government’s countermeasures and rivals’ attacks, in which a rebel organization is entirely destroyed or is no longer able to conduct significant military operations (Timothy Wickham-Crowley, *Guerillas and Revolution in Latin America: A Comparative Study of Insurgents and Regimes since 1956*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993, p. 16; Daniel Byman, *Understanding Proto-Insurgency*, Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2007, p. 1). For example, of the 28 cases of civil war coded as government victories by Ben Connable and Martin C. Libicki (*How Insurgencies End*, Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2010), 14 were characterized by the violent death of at least one rebel group (author’s coding).

power should represent a cogent incentive for rebels to put aside (at least for the time being) the quarrels they may have with each other and focus on their conflict with the government. So why does inter-rebel war occur?

My answer stems from two basic observations. First, there typically are conflicts of interest between rebel groups, due to ideological differences, disagreements over military strategy, different priorities and overlapping ambitions. As Peter Krause pointed out, two groups with the same strategic goals (e.g., ending military occupation or altering the nature of the ruling government) will often have conflicting organizational goals (such as increasing their respective membership and funding).<sup>34</sup> The existence of conflicts of interest implies that rebel groups could hinder the achievement of other rebel organizations' goals and even represent existential threats for each other. Second, the incumbent's aggregate military superiority does not automatically translate into ability or willingness to launch well-timed, decisive offensives against rebels weakened by infighting.

Situations may thus arise in which an insurgent group can rationally seize an opportunity to destroy or seriously weaken a rival without exposing itself to an unacceptably higher risk of being defeated by the incumbent. In other words, windows of opportunity to launch a hegemonic bid may open up.<sup>35</sup> Rebel groups may also resort to force in a desperate attempt to forestall the

---

<sup>33</sup> See, in particular, Waltz 1979, and John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001).

<sup>34</sup> Strategic goals resemble public goods, while organizational objectives are more akin to private goods. Peter Krause, "The Political Effectiveness of Non-State Violence: A Two-Level Framework to Transform a Deceptive Debate," *Security Studies* 22 (2), 2013: 259-94. Similarly, Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham, Kristin M. Bakke, and Lee J. M. Seymour analyze inter-factional dynamics in self-determination movements through a "dual contest" framework, according to which factions participate simultaneously in two competitions – against the state they challenge and against other coethnic factions ("Shirts Today, Skins Tomorrow: Dual Contests and the Effects of Fragmentation in Self-Determination Disputes," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56 (1), 2012: 67-93).

<sup>35</sup> Window of opportunity is analogous to the concept of political opportunity in the literature on social movements (Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald, *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

deterioration of their power position or to deal with a mounting threat posed by a rival, when no other solution appears possible – i.e., they may gamble for resurrection in the face of a window of vulnerability. Gambles for resurrection are not limited to direct attacks on rivals but include also remedial courses of action that risk provoking violent responses by rival groups.

In either case, in deciding whether to use force, rebel groups weigh the benefits and costs of inter-rebel war. On the benefits side of the equation, using force may reduce the threat posed by another group and allow the absorption of the resources previously under its control.

Coethnicity powerfully affects the benefits of inter-rebel war: coethnic rebel groups can represent both serious threats and opportunities for expansion for each other as they aspire to control the same population and territories and may expect to do so with relative ease once they achieve a hegemonic position in their ethnic community (i.e., after getting rid of their rivals).

On the costs side, inter-rebel war might weaken the rebel group(s) and thus increase the probability of government victory. But the costs of inter-rebel war can be relatively low for a group enjoying a marked superiority over its rival(s) – which promises a quick and cheap fight – and facing a government unwilling or unable to rapidly intervene to take advantage of rebel infighting. Windows of opportunity are situations in which the benefits of inter-rebel war are likely to be high and the costs low, i.e., there is a stark imbalance of power between coethnic rebel groups and the government does not pose an immediate and serious threat.<sup>36</sup> By contrast, windows of vulnerability are characterized by both high expected costs and benefits: the prospect, albeit remote, for a rebel group to overcome its predicament and avoid the associated steep costs by attacking a coethnic rival may warrant paying the costs and running the risks

---

<sup>36</sup> But notice that if the stronger group is still growing in relative terms, it will have an incentive to wait to use force until its power has peaked.

involved in fighting in the absence of a favorable balance of power and/or in the face of a serious and immediate government threat – desperate times call for desperate measures.<sup>37</sup>

We should expect gambles for resurrection to be a “later resort” type of response, as rebel groups typically would go to considerable lengths in search for a less risky way out of their predicament. For example, insurgent organizations would engage in diplomatic initiatives to break hostile encirclements and gain new allies or experiment with different mobilization strategies in the face of dwindling popular support.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, we should not see gambles for resurrection when the group’s vulnerability is due to its limited battlefield experience or problems of internal cohesion; in these situations, the group’s leadership would focus on internal

---

<sup>37</sup> My conceptualization of windows is somewhat different from Stephen Van Evera’s (*Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999, pp. 73-104). Unlike Van Evera, who defines a window of opportunity as “a fading offensive opportunity” (p. 74), I do not conceive of windows of opportunity as necessarily temporally bound, i.e., an *imminent* decline in a group’s relative power or increase in government threat is not a necessary element. These kinds of time pressures would strengthen incentives for a hegemonic bid, which, however, should already exist in a static setting (i.e., when no deterioration of balance of power or threat environment is in sight but is possible): a favorable imbalance of power and a limited government threat would tempt rebel groups to launch hegemonic bids as there is no guarantee that propitious conditions will persist in the future. Niccolò Machiavelli made the point concisely: “You do not want to be subjugated? Then promptly proceed to subjugate the neighbor as long as his weakness offers you the occasion; for if you let it pass, fugitive opportunity will move over into the enemy’s camp; and he will subjugate you” (quoted in Alfred Vagts, *Defense and Diplomacy: The Soldier and the Conduct of Foreign Relations*, New York: King’s Crown Press, 1956, p. 269). By contrast, my conceptualization of window of vulnerability is similar to Van Evera’s (who describes it as “a growing defensive vulnerability”) as I see it as inherently dynamic: it results from a rapidly deteriorating power position or a mounting threat posed by other groups. Resurrection gambles are high-cost/high-risk actions designed to prevent the negative implications of a power shift or a mounting threat from materializing.

<sup>38</sup> Beleaguered rebel groups in principle have also the option of demobilizing or moving to remote areas to avoid confrontation with government forces and rivals. This may increase rebels’ chances of physical survival (depending on the willingness of other belligerents to leave them alone), but it also entails the significant cost of giving up (potentially forever) the pursuit of the goals for which they resorted to arms in the first place. As a consequence, I expect rebel groups to tend not to adopt “hiding” strategies, and to do so only when they conclude that there is no reasonable prospect for a resurrection gamble (on hiding in international politics, see Paul Schroeder, “Historical Reality vs. Neo-Realist Theory,” *International Security* 19 (1), 1994: 108-48.

reforms and efforts to enhance battlefield experience or to solidify its control of the organization rather than pick a fight with another group.<sup>39</sup>

It is important to point out that by hegemony I do not mean absolute monopoly on the insurgent struggle. A powerful rebel group may tolerate other coethnic organizations as long as they are extremely weak and thus do not pose a meaningful threat. Of course, even groups in this weak state may at some point grow stronger or circumstances may arise that make them threatening, but I expect the marginal benefits of getting rid of them when these developments are simply remote possibilities typically not to be worth the costs for the hegemon: domestic and international supporters may accuse the group of being power-hungry or not living up to professed ideals of democracy and pluralism; moreover, contingent factors (like the prospect of befriending the foreign supporter of a very weak rebel group) may prompt the hegemon to stop short of complete monopoly of the armed struggle. In other words, my argument envisions a non-linear relationship between the inter-rebel balance of power and the probability of hegemonic bids: when the capabilities of rebel groups are roughly equal, I do not expect hegemonic bids; when a clear imbalance emerges, I expect the stronger group to launch a hegemonic bid, unless the weaker group is so feeble as not to pose a conceivable threat.<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> The leaders of an organization rocked by internal disputes typically would have little confidence of being able to execute a coherent military plan, which would be necessary to have even a minimum chance of victory against a stronger rival. In addition, advocating a dangerous course of action (as a gamble for resurrection is) could weaken the embattled leadership by lending plausibility to dissidents' accusations of reckless or incompetent conduct of the war.

<sup>40</sup> I code a group as below the threshold of extreme weakness if it has less than one-third of the fighters at the hegemon's disposal (Krause 2014 adopts a similar criterion) and there is no immediate prospect of its rapid growth (which is the case when the weaker group operates in areas controlled by the stronger group or in sparsely populated regions, and is not receiving major external support).

### *Rebel groups' motives and rational bargaining*

Before I proceed to a more thorough discussion of the benefits and costs of inter-rebel war, some clarifications of rebel groups' motives and the relation between my argument and the bargaining model of war are in order. My theory is agnostic as to the *deep* motivations of the initiator of violence: security concerns, greed and "lust for power" may all be present in both situations, although the relative importance of each factor will vary from case to case. Thus in some instances the deep motivation of a hegemonic bid may be fear, as a group seizes an opportunity to get rid of a threat before it fully materializes. Conversely, the dire straits that may prompt a rebel group to gamble for resurrection may be the result of earlier aggressive actions by that group to which other actors reacted. In other cases rebel groups may find themselves entangled in spirals of tensions and mistrust as they respond to each other's moves, which may be perceived as threatening even if not intended to be – an inter-rebel security dilemma.<sup>41</sup>

What prevents rebel groups from reaching peaceful bargains that leave them at least as well-off as if they fought while permitting them to avoid the costs of combat?<sup>42</sup> The answer, in a nutshell, is: the pervasiveness of fears of non-compliance with war-avoiding agreements, i.e., the commitment problem in anarchy.<sup>43</sup> When considering the alternatives of inter-rebel war and

---

<sup>41</sup> Robert Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30 (2), 1978: 167-214; Jack L. Snyder and Robert Jervis, "Civil War and the Security Dilemma," in Barbara F. Walter and Jack L. Snyder, eds., *Civil Wars, Insecurity, and Intervention* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

<sup>42</sup> This is the motivating puzzle of the rational choice study of war: given that fighting is costly (and assuming risk neutrality or aversion), rational actors should agree on a peaceful division of the prize that leaves all better off than if they had settled the dispute with force (James D. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization* 49 (3), 1995: 379-414).

<sup>43</sup> Note that the commitment problem in anarchy combines elements of two rationalist explanations for war – information (about other actors' present and future ambitions) and commitment problems (following Robert Powell's analysis, I do not consider indivisibilities a distinct cause of war from commitment problems; "War as a Commitment Problem," *International Organization* 60 (1), 2006: 169-203, esp. pp. 176-80). Typically rational choice models of war treat information and commitment problems separately for analytical simplicity. Scott



peaceful coexistence (including active cooperation), rebel groups will pay careful attention to their corresponding future implications. The possibility of shifts in the balance of power and of changes in the threat environment as well as uncertainty about the extent to which other rebel groups will try to take advantage of them (i.e., present and future intentions are hard to divine)<sup>44</sup> may lead a group to conclude that fighting today is preferable to reaching an agreement that may just be a scrap of paper tomorrow. Rebel groups may not only (or even primarily) be concerned about the risk of an attack down the road by a stronger or more aggressive rival, but also by the possibility of having to make unpalatable concessions to a rival in the future due to a deterioration of their bargaining position.<sup>45</sup>

As noted, commitment problems are pervasive and thus their mere existence cannot explain variation in inter-rebel war. The expected costs and benefits of inter-rebel war and its alternatives, however, do vary; in other words, in some scenarios the costs of inter-rebel war are prohibitively high while in some situations commitment problems are especially acute (as their

---

Wolford and his coauthors present a formal model that allows for their interaction (Scott Wolford, Dan Reiter and Clifford J. Carrubba, "Information, Commitment, and War," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 55 (4), 2011: 556-79).

<sup>44</sup> On the problem of others' intentions, see Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), esp. p. 50 on the distinction between "utopian" and "basic" intentions, and Jervis 1978; for a recent review of relevant International Relations literature, see Sebastian Rosato, "The Inscrutable Intentions of Great Powers," *International Security* 39 (3), 2014-15: 48-88. Much evidence confirms that individuals tend to be unable to predict with substantial accuracy even their own behavior in future contingencies (see, e.g., George Loewenstein, Ted O'Donoghue and Matthew Rabin, "Projection Bias In Predicting Future Utility," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 118 (4), 2003: 1209-48; Nira Liberman, Michael D. Sagristano and Yaacov Trope, "The Effect of Temporal Distance on Level on Mental Construal," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 38 (6), 2002: 523-34).

<sup>45</sup> It is worth noting that that my argument suggests that hegemonic bids should tend to be successful, as it does not assume a systematic bias in rebel leaders' perceptions of the balance of power and threat environment (i.e., their sense that they have a good shot at hegemony is typically right). Conversely, gambles for resurrection should more often than not fail. This is not to say, of course, that all hegemonic bids will be successful, as not all safe bets pan out. Leaders may occasionally miscalculate or make mistakes in the execution of sensible plans, and information about important factors may not be available (for example, intangible elements of the balance of power like the actual force employment or cohesion of untested units); moreover, as Carl von Clausewitz famously observed about war in general, there may well be a pervasive element of inherent unpredictability in inter-rebel war outcomes.

consequences are likely to be dire). This variation, to which I now turn, sheds much light on our puzzle.

### ***Ties that Divide: Coethnicity and the benefits of inter-rebel war***

I posit that coethnic rebel groups, due to their overlapping social bases, will tend to have stronger incentives to fight each other than non-coethnic rebel groups, as under these circumstances inter-rebel war promises significant benefits in terms of threat reduction and access to material resources.<sup>46</sup> Coethnicity amplifies defensive and aggressive motives for inter-rebel war, as it affects groups' threat perception (and thus the intensity of commitment problems) and their ability to expand their resources at their rivals' expense. Therefore, I expect coethnicity to be associated with the occurrence of both hegemonic bids and gambles for resurrection.

*Overlapping ambitions, threat perception and coethnicity.* Coethnic rebel groups tend to perceive each other as rivals or competitors for popular support and territorial control.<sup>47</sup> Getting rid of rivals promises a group unhindered access to what it covets most – its base of support and a given territory – during the war and in its aftermath (in case of victory against the government or negotiated settlement). Even if a rebel group is in principle willing to forgo these benefits for

---

<sup>46</sup> Consistently with much literature on ethnicity, I follow Donald Horowitz's definition of ethnic identity as embracing "differences identified by color, language, religion, or some other attribute of common origin" (real or imagined) (*Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985, pp. 41 and 52). For alternative definitions, see Daniel N. Posner, *Institutions and Ethnic Politics in Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Kanchan Chandra, "What Is Ethnic Identity and Does It Matter?" *Annual Review of Political Science* 9, 2006: 397-424. See below my definition and operationalization of coethnicity of rebel groups.

<sup>47</sup> This is consistent with the notion of "competitive exclusion" in population and organizational ecology, according to which competition is a function of the resources groups draw from, i.e., they only compete with other groups tapping into the same resource pool (David Lowery and Virginia Gray, "The Population Ecology of Gucci Gulch, or the Natural Regulation of Interest Group Numbers in the American States," *American Journal of Political Science* 39 (1), 1995: 1-29; for an application of competitive exclusion to interactions between terrorist groups, see Stephen Nemeth, "The Effect of Competition on Terrorist Group Operations," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 58 (2): 336-62). Similarly, Claire Metelits defines rivalry between rebel groups as a situation in which insurgent groups confront other organizations that extract from the same resource pool (*Inside Insurgency: Violence, Civilians, and Revolutionary Group Behavior*, New York: New York University Press, 2010, pp. 11-2).

the sake of inter-rebel peace, it cannot assume that its rivals will reciprocate down the road under changed circumstances and thus may decide to take advantage of an opportunity to launch a hegemonic bid. In other words, the intense conflict of interest implied by coethnicity affects rebel groups' threat perception and the intensity of commitment problems.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, as Krause points out, rival rebel groups may pose less direct threats to each other by engaging in outbidding and spoiling behavior, with potential detrimental effects on the rebel movement's ability to reach its strategic goals.<sup>49</sup> Rebel groups may also fear that their rivals might reach an agreement with the government, leaving them exposed to the incumbent's superior strength. Thus, using force to get rid of or weaken rivals could ameliorate a group's threat environment.

*Cumulativity and coethnicity.* Coethnicity may also increase the probability of inter-rebel war through resource cumulativeness, which in turn affects the net military benefits of achieving hegemony in the rebel camp. Resources controlled by coethnic rebel groups tend to be highly cumulative, i.e., they can be extracted at low cost and their possession allows a group to protect itself and expand its power.<sup>50</sup> When a rebel organization wipes out a coethnic group, it can often coopt large segments of the latter's membership thus increasing its manpower. The fact that the two organizations have similar ethnic credentials represents a powerful motive for members of the defeated group to join the other organization (where they are usually absorbed as individuals rather than separate military units, so as to minimize threats to its cohesion). More importantly, the group that has the upper hand in inter-rebel fighting is likely to be able to recruit and extract resources at a relatively low cost from the coethnic population previously under its rival's

---

<sup>48</sup> Walt 1987.

<sup>49</sup> Krause 2014.

<sup>50</sup> See Van Evera 1999, pp. 105-16, for a discussion of cumulativeness of resources as a cause of interstate war.

control.<sup>51</sup> Achieving rebel hegemony under these circumstances (in particular if it can be done through a quick and cheap fight) holds the prospect of strengthening the group that gets the upper hand.<sup>52</sup> By contrast, a group perceived by the social base of support of a defeated rival as a foreign occupier is likely to have a hard time with recruitment and extraction activities and will have to devote substantial resources to policing the population, to the point that rebel hegemony may result in a net drain of the organization's resources.<sup>53</sup> For this reason, the existence of profound conflicts of interest between non-coethnic rebel groups (for example, about the distribution of power among a country's ethnic groups) does not tend to provide incentives for inter-rebel war: the resolution of these conflicts of interest is better left to the post-war settings, as infighting would only benefit the government. The cumulativeness of resources under the control of coethnic rebel groups thus amplifies *both* aggressive motives and security concerns: rebel groups may be tempted to use force to expand the resources at their disposal and at the same time may fear that their rivals at some point will be similarly tempted.

---

<sup>51</sup> Undisputed access to its ethnic support base is likely to be more important than the absorption of rivals' fighters for a would-be insurgent hegemon. In fact, rebel groups do not typically field mass armies as relatively small forces are better suited for guerrilla warfare; a large, pliable support base can provide intelligence, safe havens, money and logistical support in addition to recruits. Moreover, some elements of a defeated rival group may be considered as irreconcilable and thus it may be preferable to replace them with less experienced but more reliable new recruits.

<sup>52</sup> Ethnic rebel hegemony resembles Daniel Corstange's "ethnic monopsony" – the situation in which a political constituency defined along ethnic lines is dominated by a single vote-buying party/patron. The fact that inter-ethnic clientelistic transactions are too costly to be efficient creates a protected ethnic vote market with high barriers to entry for non-coethnic competitors; when there is no intra-ethnic competition, the patron can buy votes at a low price, which gives rise to the twin phenomena of ethnic favoritism and ethnic neglect – patronage is distributed to coethnics, but it is "closer to a trickle than a deluge" (Daniel Corstange, *The Price of a Vote: Ethnicity and Clientelism in the Middle East*, 2013, book manuscript, Columbia University, chapter 1). My argument is agnostic as to whether a rebel hegemon can extract more resources from its ethnic base on a per capita basis, while it expects the hegemon to benefit from a larger pool of resources and the reduced risk of interference with its strategy by other organizations.

<sup>53</sup> As Stephen Van Evera (1999, p. 107) points out, "often resources empower their current owners but not a conqueror, or they empower the conqueror at a discount." The point is not that foreign occupiers are typically unable to extract resources from occupied territories (they sometimes succeed) but that extraction costs are likely to be relatively high. The most thorough discussion of cumulativeness in the context of foreign occupations (in particular of industrial resources in the 20th Century) remains Peter Liberman, *Does Conquest Pay? The Exploitation of Occupied Industrial Societies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

These fears are not only a function of abstract strategic calculations by rebel leaders, but they are also reinforced by two dynamics characterizing relations between coethnic rebel groups, which in turn enhance threat perception. First, coethnic rebel organizations have a relatively easy time infiltrating each other (by either “turning” members of a rival group or placing “agents” within it). This can pose serious threats to organizational cohesion as infiltrators may sow discord between a group’s factions and foment disgruntlement among its rank-and-file. Second, the fact that coethnic rebel groups tend to have overlapping recruitment pools and areas of operation generates opportunities for their members to interact with each other, which can sometimes lead to limited armed confrontations between them. These skirmishes may occur at the initiative of fighters and low-level commanders or they may be part of a larger plan envisioning the use of “salami tactics” to expand an organization’s influence at a rival’s expense while keeping the risk of all-out confrontation at acceptably low levels.<sup>54</sup> The rebel leadership may be unable to discern whether these limited clashes reflect the rival organization’s policy or are isolated accidents, but it will typically react to their occurrence by revising upwards its assessment of threat posed by the rival.<sup>55</sup>

It is important to note that, in practice, the existence of ethnically-mixed areas reduces the sharpness of the distinction between dyads of coethnic rebel groups (prone to war) and non-coethnic groups (prone to peaceful coexistence). Non-coethnic rebel groups may violently vie for control of an area where their respective potential supporters live intermingled. Unchallenged control of this area would offer the benefit of mobilizing and extracting resources from

---

<sup>54</sup> Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966).

<sup>55</sup> See Robert Jervis’s (1976) discussion of the spiral model and related misperceptions (in particular pp. 62-76 and 319-42). See also Philip E. Tetlock’s treatment of the fundamental attribution error (“Social Psychology and World Politics,” in Daniel Gilbert, Susan T. Fiske and Gardner Lindzey, eds., *Handbook of Social Psychology* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1998), pp. 877-8.

coethnics, but may also entail the significant costs of policing a potentially hostile ethnic-other population or forcing it to leave (with the associated political and image negative consequences). Thus I expect inter-rebel war to be less likely between non-coethnic rebel groups whose distinct popular bases of support are partially intermingled than between coethnic rebel groups; I also expect inter-rebel war to be more likely between non-coethnic rebel groups whose potential supporters live in ethnically-mixed areas than between non-coethnic rebel groups whose supporters inhabit distinct geographical areas.

*Micro-foundations of the coethnicity argument.* Having discussed why I expect coethnicity to affect the risk of inter-rebel war, some observations about the argument's micro-foundations are in order. First, my argument is fully consistent with two fundamental insights of the constructivist research agenda on nationalism and ethnic politics – the malleable (to varying degrees) and multidimensional nature of ethnic identities.<sup>56</sup> Most existing identities are not “ancient” but rather the product of relatively recent historical processes; and even identity categories with a long history, today bear little resemblance to their original meaning or content. Typically, in both war and peace-time, there are a multitude of ethnic identities that leaders and individuals may emphasize. For example, in the context of the Kurdish insurgencies against the Iraqi state, tribal loyalties and linguistic differences between Kurdish Sorani and Kurmanji speakers complicated the picture of Kurdish rebels pitted against an Arab government. In the Angolan independence struggle, in addition to the Angolan-Portuguese cleavage, intra-Angolan divisions between Bakongo, Mbundu, Ovibundu and mestiços were clearly visible; similarly, in the Eritrean rebellion against Ethiopian rule, the Ethiopian-Eritrean divide coexisted with intra-Eritrean tribal and religious distinctions.

---

<sup>56</sup> Kanchan Chandra, “Cumulative Findings in the Study of Ethnic Politics,” *APSA-CP* 12 (1), 2001: 7-11; “Introduction”, in Kanchan Chandra, ed., *Constructivist Theories of Ethnic Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

The fluid and nested character of ethnic identities, however, does not imply that political entrepreneurs can credibly appeal to and successfully mobilize potential supporters along any conceivable identity dimension. Identities are not constructed out of thin air and the activation of existing identities does not take place in a vacuum, as history and shared culture at any time constrain the range of identity choices available to individuals and ethnic entrepreneurs. In particular, I posit that the recent experience of large-scale violence across ethnic lines dramatically affects the salience of the corresponding cleavage, thus drastically increasing the appeal of that identity dimension and reducing the prospects of mobilizing alternative identities in the short term.<sup>57</sup> This is not to deny that ethnic identity shifts (the acquisition by an individual of a new ethnic identity that replaces an existing one) and ethnic defection (the process by which an individual joins an organization opposed to the national aspirations of the ethnic group with which she identifies) occur in ethnic civil wars, as Stathis Kalyvas documented.<sup>58</sup> My more modest contention is that those processes are powerfully constrained by highly salient ethnic identities in the context of ongoing ethnic civil wars.<sup>59</sup> Recruiting and eliciting support across ethnic lines is not impossible, but it is difficult and expensive, requiring belligerents to devote

---

<sup>57</sup> Anecdotal evidence in support of the “violence hardens ethnic identities” hypothesis is ubiquitous in accounts of episodes of ethnic civil war (see, for example, James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, “Violence and the Social Construction of Ethnic Identity,” *International Organization* 54 (4), 2000: 845–77). Several studies relying on surveys in conflict and post-conflict settings provide more systematic supporting evidence (e.g., Moses Shayo and Asaf Zussman, “Judicial Ingroup Bias in the Shadow of Terrorism,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 126, 2011: 1447–84, which finds that Israeli Arab and Jewish judges’ in-group bias is positively associated with the intensity of terrorism in the vicinity of the court).

<sup>58</sup> Kalyvas 2008.

<sup>59</sup> Following Kalyvas (2006 and 2008), I adopt a broad definition of civil war, which includes anti-colonial wars. Other studies distinguish the two types of war for empirical or theoretical reasons (see, for example, James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, “Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War,” *American Political Science Review* 97 (1), 2003: 75-90, esp. pp. 76-7). By “ethnic civil wars” or “civil wars fought along ethnic lines” I mean “a subset of civil wars defined on the basis of their recruitment patterns and actors’ goals;” thus the Turkey-PKK conflict, for example, was an ethnic war because the PKK ranks did not include ethnic Turks (but Turkey managed to form pro-state Kurdish militias) and because the PKK’s goals challenged the existing power relations between the state and the Kurds (Kalyvas 2008, pp. 1044 and 1050).

large amounts of military and economic resources to the task.<sup>60</sup> By contrast, a shared, overarching ethnic identity enables rebel groups to absorb with relative ease the resources of their defeated rivals.<sup>61</sup>

A second important point is that the idea that individuals are more likely to join and support a coethnic rebel group is consistent with the robust experimental finding of human parochialism – the tendency to cooperate with and favor members of one’s group – and with a vast amount of evidence from Comparative Politics in the developing world, where much political and economic competition occurs along ethnic lines.<sup>62</sup> In ethnically heterogeneous clientelistic democracies and electoral autocracies, elections are often ethnic censuses, as ethnic identity provides a remarkably precise predictor of voting behavior.<sup>63</sup> Relatedly, patronage tends

---

<sup>60</sup> Kalyvas presents several examples of governments capable of recruiting militias from rebellious ethnic groups and provides statistical evidence that the success of Nazi Germany’s recruitment efforts in occupied Greece varied with the occupier’s degree of territorial control (Kalyvas 2008).

<sup>61</sup> It should be noted that my argument is consistent with Paul Staniland’s insight that rebel groups are typically built on pre-existing social networks, such as political parties, religious organizations, kinship ties, and veteran associations (“Organizing Insurgency: Networks, Resources, and Rebellion in South Asia,” *International Security* 37 (1), 2012b: 142–77; *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014). These social networks sometimes have a “sub-ethnic” character (e.g., in Iraq the PUK historically recruited mostly from Kurdish Sorani speaking areas, while the KDP drew most of its support from Kurdish Kurmanji speaking territories). In as much as rebel groups’ claims to represent a broader ethno-national community pitted against an ethnic-other (the government and its support base) are plausible to their constituencies, rebel resources should be relatively easily cumulable across the social networks underpinning different coethnic rebel groups.

<sup>62</sup> Nicholas Sambanis, Jonah Schulhofer-Wohl and Moses Shayo, “Parochialism as a Central Challenge in Counterinsurgency,” *Science* 336, 2012: 805-8.

<sup>63</sup> See, for example, Robert H. Bates, “Ethnic Competition and Modernization in Contemporary Africa,” *Comparative Political Studies* 6 (4), 1974: 457-84; James D. Fearon, “Why Ethnic Politics and ‘Pork’ Tend to Go Together,” presented at a MacArthur Foundation-sponsored conference on Ethnic Politics and Democratic Stability, Chicago, May 1999; Nicolas van de Walle, “Presidentialism and Clientelism in Africa’s Emerging Party Systems,” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 41 (2), 2003: 297–321; Kanchan Chandra, *Why Ethnic Parties Succeed: Patronage and Ethnic Head Counts in India* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Posner 2005; Karen F. Ferree, “Explaining South Africa Racial Census,” *The Journal of Politics* 68 (4), 2006: 803–15, 2008; Leonardo R. Arriola, “Capital and Opposition in Africa: Coalition Building in Multiethnic Societies,” *World Politics* 65 (2), 2013: 233–72.



to be distributed along ethnic lines.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, developing countries' rulers often resort to the practice of "ethnic stacking" (i.e., filling the most sensitive government positions, in particular in the security apparatus, with coethnics) for coup-proofing and ensuring the loyalty of the armed forces to their regime.<sup>65</sup>

While these empirical patterns are widely acknowledged, there is much debate over the underlying causal mechanisms. The dominant view in political science holds that individuals support coethnic organizations (and more generally cooperate with coethnics) because they materially gain from it. In particular, voters are thought to find coethnic politicians' promises to share the spoils of power credible, while heavily discounting patronage pledges from ethnic-others.<sup>66</sup> This instrumental calculus is in turn a function of better monitoring and enforcement of agreements between coethnics – due to denser social networks within, rather than between, ethnic groups, which facilitate information flows – and the existence of a self-fulfilling expectation (or norm) that coethnics will cooperate with each other, unlike non-coethnics. The literature provides important empirical evidence in support of the two mechanisms, but lacks

---

<sup>64</sup> Corstange 2013; Raphael Franck and Ilia Rainer, "Does the Leader's Ethnicity Matter? Ethnic Favoritism, Education, and Health in Sub-Saharan Africa," *American Political Science Review* 106 (2), 2012: 294-325. Kimuli Kasara finds that the taxation of agriculture in Africa represents an exception to the pattern of ethnic favoritism in patronage distribution observed by other scholars, as cash crop farmers of the same ethnicity as the head of the state face higher taxes ("Tax Me If You Can: Ethnic Geography, Democracy, and the Taxation of Agriculture in Africa," *American Political Science Review* 101 (1), 2007: 159- 72). For evidence that patterns of ethnic favoritism in the distribution of government benefits vary across countries and across development outcomes, see Eric Kramon and Daniel N. Posner, "Who Benefits from Distributive Politics? How the Outcome One Studies Affects the Answer One Gets," *Perspectives on Politics* 11 (2), 2013: 461-74.

<sup>65</sup> Cynthia H. Enloe, *Ethnic Soldiers: State Security in Divided Societies* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1980); James T. Quinnlivan, "Coup-Proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East," *International Security* 24 (2), 1999: 131-65; Theodore McLauchlin, "Loyalty Strategies and Military Defection in Rebellion," *Comparative Politics* 42 (3), 2010: 333-50; Philip Roessler, "The Enemy Within: Personal Rule, Coups, and Civil War in Africa," *World Politics* 63 (2), 2011: 300-46.

<sup>66</sup> Posner 2005, p. 105.

strong explanations for the higher density of ethnic networks and the emergence of the norm of intra-ethnic cooperation.<sup>67</sup>

Accounts of intra-ethnic cooperation emphasizing this narrow conception of self-interest are not necessarily incompatible with the existence of deeper group attachments. In some circumstances material and non-material considerations are likely to reinforce each other; for example, Kanchan Chandra posits that individuals expect to reap both material and psychic benefits from having coethnics in power (i.e., they “bask in the reflected status of the patron”).<sup>68</sup> In other circumstances, individuals may face a trade-off between material and psychic/emotional benefits. Psychological theories<sup>69</sup> and theories of political socialization<sup>70</sup> converge in explaining

---

<sup>67</sup> For experimental evidence, see James Habyariamana et al., “Why Does Ethnic Diversity Undermine Public Goods Provision?” *American Political Science Review* 101 (4), 2007: 709–25; *Coethnicity: Diversity and the Dilemmas of Collective Action* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2009). These authors do not find support for explanations of lower levels of cooperation across ethnic lines stressing different ethnic preferences for public goods or high levels of other-regardingness within ethnic groups.

<sup>68</sup> Chandra 2004, p. 12. Social psychology has a specific term for the phenomenon: BIRGing, basking in reflected glory.

<sup>69</sup> The most influential psychological theory of identity is social identity theory, which explains group attachment as a function of individuals’ natural tendency to identify with groups and their need for self-esteem, making group identity a vehicle of self-esteem (Henri Tajfel, *Human Groups and Social Categories*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981). For overviews of experimental studies of intergroup bias inspired by social identity theory, see Toshio Yamagishi, Nobuhito Jin and Toko Kiyonari, “Bounded Generalized Reciprocity: Ingroup Boasting and Ingroup Favoritism,” *Advances in Group Processes* 17, 1999: 161-97; and John F. Dovidio and Samuel L. Gaertner, “Ingroup Bias,” in Susan T. Fiske, Daniel T. Gilbert and Gardner Lindzey, eds., *Handbook of Social Psychology* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2010). Experimental studies show that inter-group bias tends to be stronger when “real” groups rather than laboratory-created “minimal groups” are involved (Brian Mullen, Rupert Brown and Colleen Smith, “Ingroup Bias as a Function of Salience, Relevance, and Status: An Integration,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 22, 1992: 103-22) and their relations are characterized by competition (Daan Scheepers et al., “The Social Functions of Ingroup Bias: Creating, Confirming, or Changing Social Reality,” *European Review of Social Psychology* 17 (1), 2006: 359-96) or threat (Blake M. Riek et al., “Does a Common Ingroup Identity Reduce Intergroup Threat?,” *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 13 (4), 2010: 403-23).

<sup>70</sup> According to political socialization theories, long-term loyalty to an ethnic or national group develops through processes of socialization in the family, school and civic associations (see, for example, Jóhanna Kristín Birnir, *Ethnicity and Electoral Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007). Keith Darden’s argument about the durability of national loyalties after the introduction of mass schooling can be considered a type of political socialization theory (*Resisting Occupation: Mass Schooling and the Creation of Durable National Loyalties*, Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

why individuals develop genuine and durable ethnic attachments, which in turn prompt them to support organizations seen as defending the interests of the group.<sup>71</sup> These theoretical approaches may help account for the display of individuals' strong, emotional commitment to an ethnic cause, the corresponding hostility towards ethnic opponents, and willingness to pay high costs (up to sacrificing one's life), which are not easily reconcilable with narrow, material self-interest.<sup>72</sup> Relatedly, much of the literature conceives of ethnic mobilization as a collective action problem: the goals being pursued are public goods, from which non-participants cannot be easily excluded and whose probability of provision is not affected by individual participation. As the benefits of action are public but the costs are borne privately, rational individuals should free-ride, in particular in contexts in which the costs are steep, such as social protests when the government is likely to violently repress and campaigns of antistate violence.<sup>73</sup> Arguments emphasizing narrow, material rationality have a hard time making sense of individual participation under these circumstances.<sup>74</sup>

---

<sup>71</sup> Evolutionary biology can be seen as providing a foundation for both sets of theories. Jung-Kyoo Choi and Samuel Bowles present a theoretical model showing how parochial altruism (i.e., other-regardingness towards one's fellow group members combined with hostility towards out-groups) could have survived a selection process driven by inter-group conflict ("The Coevolution of Parochial Altruism and War," *Science* 318, 2007: 636-40; for supporting ethnographic and archeological evidence, see Samuel Bowles, "Did Warfare Among Ancestral Hunter-Gatherers Affect the Evolution of Human Social Behaviors?," *Science* 324, 2009: 1293-8).

<sup>72</sup> Roger Petersen, *Understanding Ethnic Violence, Western Intervention in the Balkans: The Strategic Use of Emotion in Conflict* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Donald L. Horowitz, *The Deadly Ethnic Riot*, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001, pp. 553-4; Lee Ann Fuji, "The Puzzle of Extra-Lethal Violence," *Perspectives on Politics* 11 (2), 2013: 410-26.

<sup>73</sup> Roger V. Gould, "Collective Violence and Group Solidarity: Evidence from Feuding Society," *American Sociological Review* 64 (3), 1999: 356-80. The collective action framework informs also analyses of risky social contestation that do not necessarily occur along ethno-national lines (Elisabeth J. Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>74</sup> Ashutosh Varshney, "Nationalism, Ethnic Conflict, and Rationality," *Perspectives on Politics* 1 (1), 2003: 85-99; Jeremy Ginges and Scott Atran, "What Motivates Participation in Violent Political Action: Selective Incentives or Parochial Altruism?," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1167, 2009: 115-23. A rationalist objection to

Both sets of explanations of the effects of coethnicity have some theoretical and empirical plausibility and it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to provide an assessment of their relative importance. The key point is that, building on much empirical evidence on a wide range of socio-political phenomena, I expect coethnicity to powerfully shape individual behavior during ethnic civil war and thus operate as cause of inter-rebel war. This argument challenges two influential (albeit radically contrasting) views in the literature and public discourse about the effects of ethnic identity on civil war behavior.<sup>75</sup> One view sees coethnicity as a powerful source of solidarity and cooperation. In particular, the ethnic security dilemma literature expects

---

the collective action argument would emphasize the density of ethnic social networks, allowing the provision of selective incentives to participants and defectors (Samuel Popkin, *The Rational Peasant*, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979). While I certainly do not dispute the notion that selective rewards and coercion play an important role in ethno-national collective action, I contend that they are not the whole story. In-depth civil war case studies suggest that much individual participation depends on the strong norms of reciprocity and high levels of trust characterizing sub-ethnic networks (e.g., Roger D. Petersen, *Resistance and Rebellion: Lessons from Eastern Europe*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001; Sarah Elizabeth Parkinson, "Organizing Rebellion: Rethinking High-Risk Mobilization and Social Networks in War," *American Political Science Review* 107 (3), 2013: 418-32). Moreover, selective violence cannot explain individual participation in other forms of risky collective action like ethnic riots, as rioters are typically not coerced into joining (Horowitz 2001; Alexandra Scacco, *Anatomy of a Riot: Participation in Ethnic Violence in Nigeria*, 2012, book manuscript, New York University). Stathis Kalyvas and Matthew Kocher offer a strong rationalist critique of the collective action logic of individual participation in civil war, arguing that indiscriminate and poorly targeted government violence may well provide individuals with incentives to join a rebel group, as a means of reducing their risk of being victimized ("How 'Free' is Free-Riding in Civil Wars? Violence, Insurgency, and the Collective Action Problem," *World Politics* 59 (2), 2007: 177-216). However, their critique does not necessarily undermine the idea that individual participation in ethnic collective action may require a different kind of explanation in some circumstances. As Kalyvas and Kocher note, their argument is more likely to apply to the phase of massive popular recruitment by a rebel group than to the earlier phase of the formation of the core of the organization (i.e., early movers in rebellion are peculiar individuals, "irrationally" willing to take major risks). Moreover, the documented fact that government violence in civil war is often indiscriminate or poorly targeted does not necessarily imply the absence of correlation between individual involvement with a rebel organization and risk of victimization (i.e., many individuals that are not involved are victimized, but the chance of victimization may be increased by involvement in some context); this is a largely open empirical question (Wood 2003, p. 13, suggests that protection from government indiscriminate attacks was not a key driver of individual participation in the insurgency in El Salvador).

<sup>75</sup> The hypothesis that coethnicity may provide incentives for inter-rebel violence is not entirely novel. For example, Jannie Lilja and Lisa Hultman argue that "[i]f a rebel group can become the single leader of the ethnic community in ethnically homogenous areas, the entire civilian population will subsequently fall into rebel hands. Rebels, therefore, will strive to establish dominance over the ethnic community by targeting rivals and thereby eliminating competition over social control" ("Intraethnic Dominance and Control: Violence Against CoEthnics in the Early Sri Lankan Civil War," *Security Studies* 20 (2), 2011: 171-97, in particular p. 173). However, the authors do not test the hypothesis that coethnic rebel organizations are more likely to clash than non-coethnic ones. Similarly, Hanne Fjelde and Desirée Nilsson point out that coethnicity may increase the probability of inter-rebel violence, but they also provide arguments for why coethnicity could cause cooperation (Fjelde and Nilsson 2012, p. 608).

individuals to flock automatically to their ethnic side under conditions of state collapse or large-scale ethnic violence, and tends to treat ethnic groups, rather than ethnic armed organizations, as the relevant units of analysis.<sup>76</sup> The other view (emerged in part as a reaction to the first one) contends that coethnicity does not have an important independent effect on civil war behavior, but rather tends to be a façade for more mundane, often materialistic and survival-related, considerations.<sup>77</sup> Most recently, Christia has argued that rebel leaders make alliance decisions following a power-driven logic but justify those choices to their followers using identity arguments.<sup>78</sup> My hypothesis that coethnicity affects the risk of inter-rebel violence by increasing the net military benefits of fighting challenges the view of ethnicity as largely epiphenomenal. At the same time, it qualifies the earlier view emphasizing the causal role of ethnicity by pointing out that in some circumstances shared identity may increase the probability of violent conflict rather than decrease it.<sup>79</sup>

*Ideology vs. ethnicity.* A final clarification about ethnicity is in order. Claiming that coethnicity affects the risk of inter-rebel war in the context of ongoing ethnic civil wars by

---

<sup>76</sup> Barry R. Posen, “The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict,” *Survival* 31 (1), 1993: 27-37; Kaufmann 1996.

<sup>77</sup> Kalyvas (2006, 2008) has influentially argued that macro-cleavages and ethnic identities are much less important predictors of civil war behavior than military coercion and local-level (sometimes even interpersonal) relationships and disputes.

<sup>78</sup> The author is careful in pointing out that her claims about identity are limited to alliance decisions in multi-party civil wars and do not necessarily apply to other dimensions of civil war behavior (e.g., civilian targeting) (Christia 2012, p. 48). Similarly, my claims about the divisive effects of shared ethnic identity apply to groups that are engaged in armed struggle against the state and have established a minimum level of organizational coherence; by contrast, I expect coethnicity to operate as a magnet and glue for small bands of individuals planning to launch a rebellion against the state.

<sup>79</sup> This dissertation can be seen as contributing to an emerging literature advancing more specific claims about the causal effects of ethnicity on civil war behavior (e.g., Jason Lyall, “Are Coethnics More Effective Counterinsurgents? Evidence from the Second Chechen War,” *American Political Science Review* 104 (1), 2010: 1-20; Jason Lyall, Kosuke Imai and Yuki Shiraito, “Dropping a Dime: Coethnic Bias and Wartime Informing,” working paper, 2013; Sambanis, Schulhofer-Wohl and Shayo 2012).

increasing both defensive and aggressive motives for rebel-on-rebel violence does not imply that other types of shared identities may not be associated with similar dynamics. While much of the literature stresses the peculiar nature of ethnic identities,<sup>80</sup> a substantial body of experimental evidence suggests that humans' "groupness" may be activated along dimensions unrelated to ethnic identity.<sup>81</sup> It is thus conceivable that other forms of identities (for example, ideology) may come to play a similar role in some civil wars.<sup>82</sup> On this issue I take a theoretically agnostic position and test empirically the proposition that that a shared ideological outlook (as distinct from shared ethno-national identity) is associated with a higher risk of inter-rebel war in the case studies.

### ***Costs of inter-rebel war: government constraints and the rebel balance of power***

Having discussed the benefits of inter-rebel war and how they relate to coethnicity, I now turn to its costs. These are not limited to the blood and treasure spent in the infighting but include increased vulnerability to the incumbent and forgone opportunities to make gains against it. The government could take advantage of the situation and attack the squabbling rebels or it could let them bleed each other white and then take on the debilitated victor.<sup>83</sup> Moreover, inter-rebel

---

<sup>80</sup> Donald Horowitz (1985, p. 104) famously said that "the ethnic group is not just a trade union," as ethnic solidarity is based on "intense passions" rather than the expectation of tangible economic benefits. Birnir (2007, p. 28) locates the source of the difference between the two types of identities in the corresponding socialization processes, as she argues that ethnic socialization fosters loyalty to the *ethnic group* while other forms of political socialization create loyalty to the party or specific organizations. Kanchan Chandra (2006) suggests that the attributes of stickiness and relative visibility of ethnic identities may represent key differences from other forms of identity.

<sup>81</sup> See the laboratory-created "minimal group" experiments research agenda pioneered by Tajfel (1981).

<sup>82</sup> For a classic analysis of conflict between states sharing the same ideology due to competition for leadership of the communist movement, see Richard Lowenthal, *World Communism: The Disintegration of a Secular Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).

fighting could push the group that is losing to turn to the government for help, which in turn could significantly strengthen the government's counterinsurgency effort.<sup>84</sup> In addition, inter-rebel war may divert resources from the anti-government struggle in moments in which a concerted insurgent effort could bring about important territorial gains or even decisive rebel victory and thus offer an opportunity for the incumbent's forces to regroup.

However, the costs of inter-rebel war may be low when there is an imbalance of power between rebel organizations, and the government does not represent a serious and immediate military threat. Under these conditions, a powerful group may be tempted to wipe out its rival(s) to become the rebel hegemon without an excessive increase in the risk of being defeated by the government.

The government is typically the strongest belligerent in civil war but this superiority does not mean constant willingness and ability to unrestrainedly bring to bear its military power.<sup>85</sup> Political, military and logistical constraints may prevent or limit government power projection on short notice, so that the government may not represent a serious and immediate threat to the

---

<sup>83</sup> Geoffrey Blainey makes this point in the context of inter-state war in a metaphorical discussion of fighting waterbirds and the opportunistic fisherman (*Causes of War*, New York: Free Press, 1973, pp. 57-62). Richard Rosecrance labels the loss of relative power to a sideline-sitter as the "dilemma of the victor's inheritance" (*Rise of the Trading State*, New York: Basic Books, 1986, p. 34).

<sup>84</sup> Staniland 2012a. In the context of international relations, see Randall Schweller's discussion of the *tertius gaudens* (the enjoying third), which can extract an exploitative price for its support to one of the two parties in conflict (*Deadly Imbalances: Tripolarity and Hitler's Strategy of World Conquest*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1998, p. 48).

<sup>85</sup> Paul Staniland makes a similar point noting that "[s]tates are often content not to devote their full resources to internal war. Deployed state capacity is endogenous to political relationships, which is why we see governments like India's and Pakistan's – which can rely on vast, ruthless security forces – willing to cut deals, bring insurgents into state governments, and look the other way at collusion between politicians, militants, and organized crime" (Paul Staniland, "States, Insurgents, and Wartime Political Orders," *Perspectives on Politics* 10 (2), 2012c: 243-64, p. 253). Staniland focuses on government's resolve and interests, while I also emphasize that in some phases the incumbent may be simply unable to launch all-out offensives because its forces are in need of reorganization or committed elsewhere. Keren Fraiman and Austin Long ("When Failed States Succeed: Assessing Weak State Capacity and Choice to Confront Violent Non-state Actors," working paper, 2014) make an analogous distinction.

rebels. For example, for a long time the prospect of high domestic political costs deterred the Indian government from launching large-scale offensives against the rebellions waged by United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and the Naxalite insurgents.<sup>86</sup> Only after having repelled the Somali invasion in 1978 did the Ethiopian army vigorously focus on the growing Eritrean insurgency. In the fall of 1963, Iraqi army units redeployed from the Kurdish front to execute a coup in Baghdad; the purges that followed significantly weakened Iraq's military machine, which was unable to take advantage of the subsequent Kurdish infighting.

Rebel groups can gage whether the government poses a serious and immediate military threat based on recent and ongoing battlefield trends and troop deployments as well as intelligence on the incumbent's calculus. The typical scenario of serious and immediate government threat occurs when the government is engaged in (or about to launch) a major offensive against the rebels. Even if the government forces are not making major territorial headways, an intense fight in which the insurgent forces are stretched thin to resist the government's onslaught does not represent a permissive environment for inter-rebel fighting: diverting resources to inter-rebel war (even if short and decisive) may pave the way for a government's "breakthrough". By contrast, in a scenario characterized by sporadic and limited clashes, the insurgent leaders may see the diversion of resources to inter-rebel fighting as entailing an acceptable short-term increase of vulnerability vis-à-vis the incumbent.<sup>87</sup> The rebels'

---

<sup>86</sup> Sanjov Hazarika, *Strangers of the Mist: Tales of War and Peace from India's Northeast* (New Delhi: Penguin India, 1994), pp. 189-201; Sudeep Chakravarti, *Red Sun: Travels in Naxalite Country* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2008).

<sup>87</sup> In the context of guerrilla warfare, in this scenario insurgents would typically initiate contacts with security forces by launching hit-and-run attacks, which implies the rebels' ability to pick and choose when and where to fight and thus pace their losses (trends in the portion of engagements initiated by government forces are typical metrics to assess progress in counterinsurgency campaigns; see, for example, David Kilcullen, "Twenty-Eight Articles: Fundamentals of Company-Level Counterinsurgency," *Military Review*, May-June 2006: 103-8, in particular p. 106); in conventional warfare, a permissive threat environment typically would be characterized by static battle



belief that the incumbent is unable or does not have the stomach at a specific time for an all-out offensive may be reinforced by (tacit or explicit) ceasefire offers by the government or by the observation of domestic or international political constraints to escalation.

In addition to the threat posed by the government, the balance of power between rebel groups affects the prospective costs of inter-rebel war. Attacking a weaker rebel group may offer the promise of a quick and cheap victory, and the low costs of fighting could be rapidly more than compensated by the inflow of resources previously under the control of the defeated rival. By contrast, groups of comparable strength are likely to put up a serious fight. The ensuing long war of attrition would likely weaken the rebel camp as a whole and thus create the military and political conditions for a successful government offensive; in fact, the prospect of significant gains against weakened rebels may help overcome political constraints to the unrestrained use of government military power.<sup>88</sup>

Thus I expect rebel groups to launch hegemonic bids only when they see the rebel balance of power as clearly favorable<sup>89</sup> and therefore anticipate that the fight would be relatively

---

lines, which, based on previous interactions, the insurgents know they can comfortably defend in the absence of significant escalation of government attacks.

<sup>88</sup> Following analogous reasoning, Dale Copeland argues that in international politics under multipolarity a great power will launch a hegemonic bid only when it has a marked superiority over all the other states, lest great powers sitting on the sidelines take advantage of its inevitable weakening in the lengthy and costly wars that it would have to wage against comparably powerful states. By contrast, in bipolar systems major war can occur even when the poles have equal power (Dale C. Copeland, *The Origins of Major War*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000, pp. 15-20).

<sup>89</sup> This is consistent with the fundamental insight of classical and structural realisms that a balanced distribution of power in the international system is conducive to peace among great powers and with the finding that numerical superiority (i.e., a power advantage implying a sufficiently high chance of victory) is an important determinant of coalitional aggression among humans and other primates (John Tooby and Leda Cosmides, "The Evolution of War and its Cognitive Foundations," *Institute for Evolutionary Studies Technical Report* 88 (1), 1988; Michael L. Wilson, Marc D. Hauser and Richard W. Wrangham, "Does Participation in Intergroup Conflict Depend on Numerical Assessment, Range Location, or Rank for Wild Chimpanzees?" *Animal Behaviour* 61 (6), 2001: 1203–16).

quick and cheap.<sup>90</sup> In cases with more than two coethnic rebel groups, the preponderant organization does not need to possess greater military power than all other groups combined; a large, unambiguous margin of superiority vis-à-vis the “second-ranked” group would typically be sufficient, as the other organizations are likely to experience serious collective action and coordination problems in mounting an effective joint defensive effort. Each of the weaker rebel groups has an incentive to sit on the sidelines or limit its contribution in the hope that someone else “catches the buck;” moreover, for any given level of contribution to the coalition, coordination problems at the strategic, operational and tactical levels are likely to arise, thus reducing its military effectiveness.<sup>91</sup>

By contrast, rebel groups gamble for resurrection when facing an unfavorable distribution of power or a serious and imminent government threat (i.e., when the war is likely to be very costly). Windows of vulnerability, in fact, are situations in which the costs of inaction are also likely to be steep, such as when a rebel group faces the clear prospect of a major loss of power or a mounting threat posed by another group. In these cases, rebel groups are essentially weighing the costs and risks of inaction against those that a military gambit entails (i.e., a potentially costly

---

<sup>90</sup> How quickly and cheaply is enough would crucially depend on the strength of the government. In the typical scenario of limited government threat – when the incumbent has superior aggregate military strength but faces contingent constraints to power project – an inter-rebel war lasting more than a few months would probably be considered too risky. By contrast, in situations in which the government is in fact weaker than the strongest rebel group, the latter would face a very broad window of opportunity and thus could afford a longer inter-rebel fight while also engaging in a relatively intense fight against the government.

<sup>91</sup> While, to my knowledge, there are no studies on these topics in the context of civil wars, the literature on the collective action problem in international alliances and buckpassing is vast; see, in particular, Waltz 1979, pp. 164-5; Barry R. Posen, *Sources of Military Doctrine* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), pp. 63-4; Walt 1987; Thomas J. Christensen and Jack L. Snyder, “Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity,” *International Organization* 44 (2), 1990: 137-68; Dale C. Copeland, “Neorealism and the Myth of Bipolar Stability: Toward a New Dynamic Realist Theory of Major War,” *Security Studies* 5 (3), 1996: 29-89; Glenn H. Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997). On coalitional warfare in international politics, see Patricia A. Weitsman, “Alliance Cohesion and Coalition Warfare: The Central Powers and Triple Entente,” *Security Studies* 12 (3), 2003: 79-113.

war that could leave the group more vulnerable to the government): an especially difficult situation may warrant an especially risky gamble.

Rebel groups pay attention not only to the actual costs of inter-rebel war but also to its opportunity costs. Inter-rebel war inevitably entails a diversion of resources away from the anti-government struggle, but the significance of the opportunities forgone varies. When a rebel group is poised to capture important territory from the government forces (e.g., a major town or an area on an international border), it should be loath to engage in infighting so as not to jeopardize those prospective gains. Situations may also arise in which rebel victory appears within reach if the rebels sustain maximum pressure against the government. When “one final push” separates rebel groups from victory, they would be especially likely to refrain from infighting lest they spoil the opportunity. In fact, a breathing space provided by inter-rebel war could allow the government to reorganize its forces or offer an opportunity for an outside actor to prop up the beleaguered incumbent.

### *Additional questions regarding the theory's logic*

I now address three questions that the above discussion may have prompted. First, does a window of opportunity for a rebel group correspond to a window of vulnerability for another group? In short, this is possible, but it will not typically be the case. Windows of vulnerability may emerge in a context in which no rebel group is clearly stronger than the others, while windows of opportunity, by definition, entail a marked imbalance of power between rebel groups. For example, as discussed in detail in the following chapter, in 1983 the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) perceived a window of vulnerability as it faced an alliance of rival Kurdish organizations, and their foreign patron, Iran, was getting ready to invade Iraqi Kurdistan;

however, the PUK was not in a position of marked military inferiority vis-à-vis the other rebel groups. Moreover, while a temporary imbalance of power may tempt the stronger group to use force, the weaker group will typically refrain from attacking in the hope of not being targeted and thus ride out the storm (unless there is a major first-strike advantage that guarantees to the weaker group an acceptable chance of victory). Windows of vulnerability are not merely situations in which a weak group faces a serious existential threat; they entail a clear prospect of a deterioration of the balance of power or threat environment, which prompts “now or never” type of thinking.

A possible scenario in which a window of opportunity for a rebel group would correspond to a window of vulnerability for other groups is one in which an organization has sufficient power to sequentially take on its weaker rivals and would then gradually grow stronger by absorbing their resources: the powerful group would face a window of opportunity while the others would face a window of vulnerability as their relative strength would be deteriorating over time. However, in this scenario, a hegemonic bid is more likely than a gamble for resurrection as the weaker groups would be reluctant to act until less risky paths out of their predicament have been ruled out and would in any case experience collective action problems in mounting a joint attack, while the would-be hegemon would have an incentive to act swiftly.<sup>92</sup>

Second, can a rebel group face a window of opportunity and vulnerability at the same time? Stephen Van Evera’s observation in this regard travels from the context of international politics to civil war environments: “A single window can be a window of both opportunity and vulnerability, if the declining state expects to fall all the way from dominance to helpless

---

<sup>92</sup> The weaker rebel groups’ willingness and ability to act quickly would be especially low in situations in which they are experiencing serious problems of internal cohesion.

incapacity.”<sup>93</sup> The actions of a rebel group in this situation typically would be driven by a blend of window of opportunity and vulnerability logics: the group may reasonably hope to achieve a quick and cheap victory but it is also spurred into action by the dangers laying ahead, and thus may accept significantly more risks and costs in launching a hegemonic bid than would be warranted in the absence of a window of vulnerability.

Third, would a weak rebel group perceive an imminent victory against the government by a strong rival as a window of vulnerability, given that, after the incumbent’s defeat, the latter could be in a favorable position to take on the other insurgents? I expect the weak rebel group to see this development as threatening but to refrain from resorting to force in response, as the consequences would likely be worse than those of inaction. In fact, attacking a stronger rival on the brink of victory would be unlikely to radically alter the military balance, but it would have a very good chance of antagonizing the group. If the attack is not successful, the weak group may find itself “between a rock and a hard place” (the government and the strong rival) and may thus be forced to make the unpalatable decision to flip to the incumbent’s side in order to survive. By contrast, by avoiding open confrontation, the weak rebel group may hope to preserve its organizational autonomy, even if a position of subordination vis-à-vis the emerging hegemon. Moreover, the militarily weak rebel group may hope to be better at playing the electoral game and thus succeed as a political party if some form of democratic regime is established in the wake of the government’s defeat. In the unlikely scenario in which the weak rebel group did succeed in weakening the strong one by using force, it would run the risk of allowing the government to bounce back, thus forgoing victory for the rebel movement – a significant opportunity cost even for the weak rebel group. The weak group’s rank-and-file and base of support may be especially opposed to infighting when victory is within sight, as they probably

---

<sup>93</sup> Van Evera 1999, p. 74.

are less attuned to strategic considerations and more concerned about undermining the common anti-government cause than the leadership; this in turn may further discourage the leaders of the organizations from undertaking this risky course of action.<sup>94</sup>

### ***Summary of the argument and statement of hypotheses***

I expect inter-rebel war to occur when an insurgent organization faces a window of opportunity or vulnerability and inter-rebel peace to prevail in the absence of windows. Windows of opportunity emerge when there is an imbalance of power between coethnic rebel groups and the government does not pose a serious and immediate threat. In these situations, a relatively strong rebel group may be tempted to launch a violent hegemonic bid to get rid of or significantly weaken a direct competitor. Thus windows of opportunity are characterized by high expected benefits (absorbing a coethnic rival's resource base and/or getting rid of the threat that it poses) and low expected costs of inter-rebel war (a short and cheap fight in which the government is unlikely to get involved) for the initiator. The center-south quadrant of the three-by-two matrix in Figure 2.1 below corresponds to the conditions under which we should see hegemonic bids.

Windows of vulnerability arise when a group that is relatively weak or is facing a high government threat finds itself in a difficult predicament – characterized by a deteriorating power position or a mounting threat posed by a coethnic competitor – that cannot be addressed with peaceful means. Under these circumstances, the group may be tempted to gamble for resurrection – i.e., initiate a course of action likely to set it on a collision course with a rival or directly use force, in a desperate attempt to improve its difficult situation. Gambles for resurrection offer the initiator the prospect of significant benefits in terms of threat reduction (if

---

<sup>94</sup> The weak rebel group may instead resort to a spoiling behavior to derail a peace process between a stronger rebel group and the government from which it is excluded or expects not to reap sufficient benefits.

war or the remedial course of action are successful), but also entail steep costs of war (given the strength of the rival and/or the risk of government opportunistic intervention) (see the north-west quadrant). In the scenario depicted in the south-west quadrant, characterized by low costs of inter-rebel war but also a drastic deterioration of the strong group's threat environment or power position, we should see a hegemonic bid prompted by *both* the benefit of immediate threat reduction and resources accumulation/long-term threat reduction.<sup>95</sup>

**Figure 2.1: Theory of inter-rebel war**

		<i>Benefits of inter-rebel war (for initiator)</i>		
		Immediate threat reduction	Resources accumulation/ long-term threat reduction	None
<i>Costs of inter-rebel war (for initiator)</i>	High	Gamble for resurrection	No war	No war
	Low	Hegemonic bid*	Hegemonic bid	No war

*Note:* The figure illustrates the combinations of benefits and costs that motivate rebel groups to launch hegemonic bids, gamble for resurrection or abstain from inter-rebel fighting.

\*This kind of hegemonic bid is driven by a mix of window of opportunity and vulnerability thinking.

When the costs of inter-rebel war are high (i.e., the inter-rebel balance of power is not favorable, the government poses a serious and immediate threat, or the rebels are poised to make major battlefield gains and, in the extreme, rebel victory is within reach), and the only prospective benefit is the capture of the resources of a defeated coethnic rebel group and the corresponding long-term threat reduction, we should expect rebel groups to refrain from

---

<sup>95</sup> This is the situation, discussed above, in which a group is simultaneously facing windows of opportunity and vulnerability.

infighting as the benefits are not worth the huge costs of a potential defeat at the government's hands or of wasting a clear opportunity of defeating the incumbent (center-north quadrant). A fortiori, if the costs are high and there are no expected benefits at all in case of victory (i.e., there is no prospect of resource accumulation or significant threat reduction, as the groups are not coethnic), we should not see inter-rebel war (north-east quadrant). Even if the costs of inter-rebel war are low, peace should prevail among non-coethnic rebel groups as the expected benefits of hegemony would be low; in this case scarce rebel resources would be better allocated to the anti-government struggle (south-east quadrant).

From the foregoing discussion I derive two testable hypotheses, corresponding to the two typologies of inter-rebel war:

H1. Hegemonic bid. Inter-rebel war should occur when *all* of the following conditions hold:

- A rebel group enjoys a marked military advantage over its coethnic rival(s) (but not all of them are below the threshold of extreme weakness);
- The government does not represent a serious and immediate threat;
- The rebels are not poised to make major territorial gains or just about to achieve outright victory against the government.

H2. Gamble for resurrection. Inter-rebel war should occur when *all* the following conditions

hold:

- A group faces a major deterioration of its relative power or a mounting threat posed by a coethnic rival;
- The inter-rebel balance of power is not favorable to the group and/or the government poses a serious and immediate threat;



- The group's attempts at overcoming its predicament with peaceful measures have failed or alternative plans appear unworkable.

#### **4. Empirical Approach**

I adopt a mixed-method approach, combining case studies and large-N analysis. In-depth case studies of insurgencies in Iraq and Ethiopia's provinces of Eritrea and Tigray carry most of the dissertation's evidentiary burden, because testing window theory requires fine-grained and contextual measures of relative power and threat, which are exceedingly hard to code for a large number of cases over time. I also conduct three shadow case studies and statistical analysis for preliminary assessment of the external validity of my argument. The large-N part tests the coethnicity hypothesis with a dataset of all dyads of rebel groups in the post-Cold War era (for details on it, see Chapter 6). In this chapter I focus on the case study component of the dissertation, discussing in turn scope conditions and corresponding selection issues, research design, including my case selection criteria, causal inference strategy and interview method, and definitions and operationalization of key variables.

##### ***Scope conditions and selection issues***

My argument is applicable to multi-party civil wars – situations in which at least two rebel groups<sup>96</sup> are engaged in an armed struggle against the state that meets the key elements of the

---

<sup>96</sup> Pro-government militias are excluded from my analysis under the assumption that they have significantly less decision-making autonomy from the government than rebel groups have from each other, which is not to say that militias are mere “puppets” of the state; see Corinna Jentsch, Stathis N. Kalyvas and Livia Isabella Schubiger, “Militias in Civil War,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 2015 (forthcoming).

standard definitions of civil war.<sup>97</sup> In contexts other than civil wars, political actors face partially different incentive structures and normative constraints and we should thus expect them to behave differently. Other sets of arguments (for example focusing on electoral competition and patronage politics) may be more important to explain political developments after the guns fall silent.<sup>98</sup>

My focus on multi-party civil wars inevitably entails a “truncated” universe of cases, excluding civil wars that *could* have been characterized by a multitude of rebel organizations but were not. In other words, there is a process through which episodes of civil war are selected in and out of the universe of cases. This poses an inferential challenge to my analysis in as much as the selection process is related to inter-rebel war (as it is plausibly the case, for example, when the multi-party character of a civil war is caused by the splintering of an organization due to conflict between its different factions, which then continues to poison relations between the two separate groups). The seriousness of the problem, however, is limited, as my claims apply only to cases of multi-party civil wars, i.e., they do not extend to cases that were selected out. The selection issue here is inherently different from the one plaguing studies on the effectiveness of certain policies or strategies. Those studies advance counterfactual claims that an outcome of interest would have been different in the absence of a given treatment; but, as the treatment is not assigned randomly, it is hard to rule the possibility that unobservable (to the researcher)

---

<sup>97</sup> See, in particular, Meredith Reid Sarkees and Phil Schafer, “The Correlates of War Data On War: an Update To 1997,” *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 18 (1), 2000: 123-44; Nils Petter Gleditsch et al., “Armed Conflict 1946–2001: A New Dataset,” *Journal of Peace Research* 39 (5), 2002: 615–37; Fearon and Laitin 2003; Nicholas Sambanis, “What Is Civil War? Conceptual and Empirical Complexities of an Operational Definition,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 48 (6), 2004: 814-58.

<sup>98</sup> This is certainly not to deny that there are significant elements of overlap and interaction between civil war dynamics and militarized electoral politics, which is the focus of an emerging literature (see, in particular, Paul Staniland, “Armed Groups and Militarized Elections,” *International Studies Quarterly*, 2015, forthcoming).

characteristics of the units affect both the probability of the treatment and the outcome.<sup>99</sup> By contrast, in my analysis I do not make claims about units that were selected out of the universe of multi-party civil wars. To put it differently, it may be the case that the selection process into my universe of cases leads to the inclusion of civil wars with characteristics that make the operation of my independent variables especially likely (or unlikely); this, however, does not undermine my findings, as they are scope-conditioned on cases that “survived” said selection process and thus have, on average, those distinctive features.

Even if this selection process does not introduce a bias in my scope-conditioned findings, it is nonetheless worth thinking about whether it leads to under-representation or over-representation of cases in which my independent variables are likely to play an especially powerful role. The number of rebel groups taking part in a civil war at any given time (and therefore whether the war is multi-party) depends on the number of organizations that take up arms against the state in the first place, processes of organizational merge and fragmentation during the war, and violent selection at the hands of government forces or other rebel groups. For some of the determinants of the number of civil war belligerents, which I discuss below, there are no strong theoretical reasons to think that the observable universe of multi-party civil wars over-represents difficult or easy cases for my theory, while for others a plausible claim can be made that the selection process amplifies the effects of my independent variables.

Rebel groups often emerge from pre-existing social networks.<sup>100</sup> Thus the number of social networks present in a society may affect the number of rebel groups. Other things being

---

<sup>99</sup> For an example of study that effectively addresses this problem with regard to peacekeeping, see Virginia Page Fortna, *Does Peacekeeping Work? Shaping Belligerents' Choices After Civil War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

<sup>100</sup> Petersen 2001; Staniland 2014; Janet I. Lewis, “Initiating Insurgency: Rebel Group Formation and Viability in Uganda,” manuscript, Harvard University, 2012.

the same, countries and ethnic groups with large populations should have a large number of distinct social networks that would-be rebel leaders could try to “convert” into armed organizations. Cases with these characteristics are therefore likely to be common among multi-party civil wars, but there are no theoretical grounds to expect them to enhance or inhibit the operation of my independent variables. The *types* of social networks may also affect the number of rebel organizations. As Paul Staniland points out, some types of networks are likely to give rise to groups with weak leadership and a tendency to fragment, which may lead to a proliferation of rebel organizations.<sup>101</sup> These newly formed groups may be especially weak, either because they share the organizational pathologies of their “mother” organization or because of the limited resources initially at their disposal. The prevalence of weak groups in this kind of scenario may increase and decrease, respectively, the frequency of windows of vulnerability (as weak organizations are more likely to find themselves in situations in which they may need to take risky courses of action to ensure their survival) and windows of opportunity (as weak organizations are less likely to find themselves in situations in which it is safe to launch hegemonic bids). This overrepresentation of weak groups does not imply amplification or dampening of the effects of my independent variables; it simply affects the relative frequency of the two typologies of inter-rebel war and the corresponding causes.

Rebel group fragmentation and the consequent proliferation of organizations may also be a consequence of government counterinsurgency efforts. As Christia suggests, major asymmetric battlefield losses among an organization’s constituent subgroups may trigger organizational splits.<sup>102</sup> Relatedly, Staniland argues that effective counterinsurgency measures can promote

---

<sup>101</sup> Staniland 2014.

<sup>102</sup> Christia 2012.

rebel group fragmentation (in particular leadership decapitation, selective violence and efforts to establish pervasive social control on the ground, which tend to be time- and resource-intensive).<sup>103</sup> In as much as strong governments are more likely to inflict significant losses to their non-state rivals and adopt effective counterinsurgency measures, these kinds of incumbents should be prevalent in multi-party civil wars, other things being the same. Again, this should not affect the operation of my theory's independent variables but reduce the frequency of windows of opportunity – the stronger the government, the higher the risk that it may be able to take advantage of the infighting, which should discourage infighting.

Organizational merges in early phases of an insurgency may be spurred by the rebels' perception of their extreme military inferiority vis-à-vis the incumbent and the ensuing need to pull resources. These merging processes may lead to the exclusion from the universe of multi-party civil wars of cases characterized by an especially stark imbalance of power between the rebels and the government (think, for example, of a case with two weak rebel groups that early on in their struggle against the state merge into a single organization, which would be coded as a dyadic civil war). Over-representation of cases with especially strong groups may ensue. Take, for example, a case with initially four weak rebel groups that then combine to form two organizations: the two merges may more than offset the rebels' initial weakness and thus herald a multiparty civil war characterized by a balance of power relatively unfavorable to the incumbent. Under-representation of instances of extreme incumbent-rebel imbalance of power should not influence the operation of my independent variables, but, again, it may affect the relative frequency of the two types of windows.

By contrast, when organizational splintering occurs due to conflict between a group's constituent factions, the newly emerged groups may be more prone to inter-rebel war, because of

---

<sup>103</sup> Staniland 2014, pp. 46-54.

the continuation of preexisting tensions, than groups that operate as separate entities from the outset. By selecting in cases of groups at high risk of violent conflict, this dynamic would tend to amplify the effects of my independent variables; I try to address this concern in my case studies by examining the processes leading to inter-rebel war for dyads of rebel groups that splintered from the same organization and for dyads of groups that had separate origins.

Finally, it is important to note one aspect of the selection process generating the universe of multi-party civil wars that may plausibly affect the impact of the coethnicity variable. It is theoretically plausible that newly-formed rebel organizations are more likely to engage in peaceful, consensual merges than well-established groups. Young organizations are likely to be especially vulnerable to government attacks and merges promise to reduce that vulnerability; moreover, older organizations are likely to have developed bureaucratic structures and institutions that stand to lose from merge-related changes in the status quo and can act as veto players.<sup>104</sup> It seems also plausible that merges would tend to occur between coethnic rebel groups (rather than across ethnic lines), given their relatively similar membership profiles and political aspirations. If these theoretical speculations are correct, the selection process into the universe of multiparty civil wars tends to magnify the war-inducing effect of coethnicity, by excluding cases of proto-insurgencies in which coethnicity caused a peaceful merge rather than a violent hegemonic bid. Again, this is not a debilitating problem for my argument, as it is scope-conditioned to cases that have undergone the selection process. But this caveat is worth keeping in mind when considering the applicability of the logic of the argument to different contexts.

---

<sup>104</sup> Building on the work of Mancur Olson, Michael C. Horowitz makes a similar point about terrorist groups, arguing that “old” organizations are more likely to resist the introduction of disruptive new technologies such as suicide attacks (“Nonstate Actors and the Diffusion of Innovations: The Case of Suicide Terrorism,” *International Organization* 64 (1), 2010: 33-64, in particular, pp. 45-46).

### *Causal inference strategy and standards of evidence*

I test my theory and alternative explanations with a combination of process tracing and within-case congruence procedure relying on secondary and primary sources, in particular interviews with and memoirs of former rebel leaders but also archival materials.<sup>105</sup> My ultimate ambition is to trace the decision-making processes of rebel leaders and convincingly show the logic of my theory (and not that of other theories) at play in their thoughts, deliberations and actions. Thus, the strongest possible type of evidence are “confessions” – explicit statements by those responsible for a given inter-rebel fighting-related decision suggesting that they followed window of opportunity or vulnerability logic. This type of evidence about rebel decision-making is difficult to obtain. Rebel leaders may not keep written records of their decisions or they may be unwilling or unable to talk about them with researchers. Moreover, psychological studies find that subjects’ self-reported behavioral explanations are often unreliable.<sup>106</sup> Consistently, based on their experience interviewing Washington, D.C. elites, Matthew Beckmann and Richard Hall recommend “focusing the interview on elites’ strengths (i.e., knowing what they did in a specific instance) rather than their weaknesses (i.e., making empirical generalizations or espousing

---

<sup>105</sup> On process tracing, see Stephen Van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 64-7; Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theories Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), pp. 205-32; Oisín Tansey, “Process Tracing and Elite Interviewing: A Case for Non-Probability Sampling,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 40 (4), 2007: 765-772; David Collier, “Understanding Process Tracing,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 44 (4), 2011: 823-30; Andrew Bennett, “Process Tracing and Causal Inference,” in Henry E. Brady and David Collier, eds., *Rethinking Social Inquiry: Diverse Tools, Shared Standards* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010). On congruence procedure, see Stephen Van Evera 1997, pp. 58-63; George and Bennett 2005, pp. 181-204; John Gerring and Rose McDermott refer to the method as before-and-after design longitudinal comparisons (“An Experimental Template for Case Study Research,” *American Journal of Political Science* 51(3), 2007: 688-701).

<sup>106</sup> Richard E. Nisbett and Timothy D. Wilson, “Telling More Than We Can Know: Verbal Reports on Mental Processes,” *Psychological Review* 84 (33), 1977: 231-59; Timothy D. Wilson and Elizabeth W. Dunn, “Self-knowledge: Its Limits, Value, and Potential for Improvement,” *Annual Review of Psychology* 55, 2004: 493-518).

theoretical explanations).”<sup>107</sup> Heeding this advice, I focused my interviews with key rebel decision-makers on their perceptions of threat and opportunity vis-à-vis the government and other rebel groups in specific historical moments, so as to produce fine-grained accounts of their motives and calculus in the relevant episodes.

A somewhat weaker but still very important type of evidence are what I call “eyewitness accounts” – accounts of rebel leaders’ decision-making provided by their close collaborators or confidants. Its relative weakness derives from the fact that the recollections of eyewitnesses may conflate information on decision-making provided by rebel leaders themselves to (or observed by) the informants with their interpretation of relevant events. The practical advantage of this kind of evidence is that leaders’ advisors/confidants may sometimes be more accessible to researchers than the leaders themselves.

The next best type of evidence is represented by informed participants’ subjective assessments of key features of the situation (e.g., the inter-rebel balance of power or the government military posture at a given time) faced by the decision-makers. For example, high-ranking rebel military commanders may not have been privy to the underlying strategic calculus of the organization’s leaders but their assessment of the inter-rebel balance of power is likely to be quite accurate. Similarly, rebel commanders are likely to be well informed about government’s troop deployments, movements and operations and thus their accounts can allow the researcher to code the seriousness and imminence of government threat. Subjects’ assessments can be used to confirm the existence of windows of opportunity or vulnerability, given the presence of its constitutive elements, even if no direct information on the perceptions and thinking of the ultimate decision-makers is available.

---

<sup>107</sup> Matthew N. Beckmann and Richard L. Hall, “Elite Interviewing in Washington DC,” in Layna Mosley, ed., *Interview Research in Political Science* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013, p. 198).



Finally, researchers can also rely on assessments of key features of the situation advanced by third-party observers (e.g., journalists, scholars, analysts and foreign diplomats). The disadvantage of this type of evidence is its indirectness: observers' accurate assessments of the situation would be irrelevant to rebel decision-making if rebel leaders had access to different information or perceived and interpreted the same information differently. However, in the absence of major and systematic gaps between observers' and participants' perceptions of key features of the situation, third parties' assessments can be used as rough approximations.<sup>108</sup>

Even when access to individuals knowledgeable about the decision-making processes of interest or to their memoirs is not a problem and when interviews are organized to play to the strengths of the interviewees, a number of challenges to reliable process-tracing remain. First, individuals' memories of key events may be defective.<sup>109</sup> Second, informants' recollections of key events may reflect social and cultural processes shaping collective historical memory. Third, interviewees may have incentives to misrepresent their motives and actions. Their statements may reflect self-aggrandizing, exculpatory or legitimizing concerns. Fourth, subjects may also misrepresent their decisions and actions due to cognitive and motivated biases affecting their perception, leading them, for example, to ascribe benign motives to actions they conducted out

---

<sup>108</sup> I expect the objective features of the situation to affect rebel groups' behavior indirectly, through the perceptions of their leaders (e.g., if a change in the balance of power is not perceived by a group's leader, it cannot affect its behavior). However, my theory does not envision a systematic gap between third-party observers' and decision-makers' assessments of key features of the situation, even if miscalculations can, of course, occur. Access to third parties' assessments is also helpful for triangulation, to ensure that decision-makers' recollection are not mere *ex post facto* rationalizations of their decisions but are in fact anchored in generally acknowledged features of the situation.

<sup>109</sup> For example, psychological research shows that the reliability of eyewitness varies based on a number of factors (Elizabeth F. Loftus, *Eyewitness Testimony*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979; Gary L. Wells and Elizabeth A. Olson; "Eyewitness Testimony," *Annual Review of Psychology* 54: 2003: 277–95). As the reliability of memory is likely to be inversely related to the remoteness in time of the relevant events, other things being the same, memoirs written shortly after the events are likely to be more accurate than "off the top of your head" recollections during interviews conducted years later.

of greed or aggressive impulses or to attribute coherence ex post facto to a series of actions that were unrelated.<sup>110</sup>

These problems are not entirely eliminable, but for several reasons they are less of a hindrance for this project than for other types of process tracing-based research, and precautions can be adopted to further mitigate them. Experimental studies suggest that events that are characterized by high intensity (“arousal” in the jargon of this literature) and a high degree of pleasantness or unpleasantness (“valence”) tend to be better remembered both in the short- and long-run.<sup>111</sup> Highly consequential political decisions in environments fraught with uncertainty and characterized by very high stakes, as civil war settings typically are, would seem to possess these attributes and thus are likely to be relatively well remembered (although questions of ecological validity of the experimental findings remain).<sup>112</sup> Moreover, concerns that individual accounts may reflect a widely-accepted social narrative are not especially acute for interviews focusing on decision-making processes in which the rebel leaders being interviewed took part or to which they were directly exposed, rather than on their interpretations of the actions of actors

---

<sup>110</sup> Robert Jervis “Understanding Beliefs,” *Political Psychology* 27 (5), 2006: 641-63. Of particular concern for research based on interviews with decision-makers is hindsight bias, the tendency to view outcomes of events in hindsight as more foreseeable or inevitable than they seemed in foresight and related “memory distortions”, such as thinking of having made more accurate predictions than those in fact advanced or having had factual knowledge all-along while in fact it was acquired only at some later stage (Baruch Fischhoff, “Hindsight ≠ Foresight: The Effect of Outcome Knowledge on Judgment Under Uncertainty,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance* 1 (3), 1975: 288–99; Hartmut Blank, Jochen Musch and Rüdiger F. Pohl, “Hindsight Bias: On Being Wise After the Event,” *Social Cognition* 25 (1), 2007: 1-9).

<sup>111</sup> Margaret M. Bradley, “Emotional Memory: A Dimensional Analysis,” in Stephanie H. M. van Goozen, Nanne E. Van de Poll and Joseph A. Sergeant, eds., *Emotions: Essays on Emotion Theory* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1994); Charlotte van Oyen Witvliet, “Traumatic Intrusive Imagery as an Emotional Memory Phenomenon: A Review of Research and Explanatory Information Processing Theories,” *Clinical Psychology Review* 17 (5), 1997: 509-36.

<sup>112</sup> Elizabeth Wood (2003, pp. 33-4) makes a similar point about violent events witnessed or participated by her informants during the civil war in El Salvador.

to whom they did not have access. Beckmann and Hall’s observation about Washington D.C. elites seems applicable to rebel leaders: they “know exceedingly well their actions in [a] specific context.”<sup>113</sup>

The most serious challenge is associated with informants’ (conscious or unconscious) misrepresentation of the decision-making processes of interest.<sup>114</sup> While no foolproof solution exists, assessing the credibility of information based on the incentive structure of those who provide it and triangulating it with other sources are useful measures. Statements that go against the interests of their source are more credible and should be given more weight.<sup>115</sup> Thus direct evidence of rebel leaders following window of opportunity logic should be rarer but more credible than evidence of window of vulnerability thinking: rebel leaders have incentives to downplay aggressive actions in their accounts and emphasize self-defense and external compulsion (“we had no choice but to defend ourselves”).<sup>116</sup> Triangulating information across

---

<sup>113</sup> Beckmann and Hall 2013, p. 198. To my initial surprise, leaders of Tigrayan, Eritrean and Iraqi Kurdish rebel organizations I interviewed tended to remember with extreme precision and without much hesitation details of key meetings that took place decades earlier, such as the identities of each participant.

<sup>114</sup> Researchers conducting interviews with participants often report instances of wrong information provided by interviewees. For example, Kevin M. Woods et al. (*Saddam’s Generals: Perspectives of the Iran-Iraq War*, Washington, D.C.: Institute for Defense Analysis, 2011) report, as inaccurate, an Iraqi general’s denial of the use of chemical weapons by the Iraqi air force during the Iran-Iraq war.

<sup>115</sup> Eric Bleich and Robert Pekkanen, “How to Report Interview Research,” in Mosley, ed., 2013, p. 88. See also Marc Trachtenberg, *The Craft of International History: A Guide to Method* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 154-6.

<sup>116</sup> Direct evidence of window of opportunity thinking can be considered a “smoking gun”: its presence confirms the hypothesis, but its absence does not falsify it, as rebel leaders have incentives not to admit having reasoned along those lines. By contrast, direct evidence of window of vulnerability thinking can be considered a “straw-in-the wind”: its presence does not confirm the hypothesis but makes it more plausible, while its absence does not falsify it but reduces its plausibility, given that rebel leaders should be more willing to admit having followed that logic. See Van Evera 1997, pp. 31-32, and Collier 2011.

subjects and different types of evidence increases our confidence in the findings and reduces the risk of excessively relying on one idiosyncratic source.<sup>117</sup>

### ***Interview method***

I conducted fifty-four semi-structured interviews with forty former senior cadres and political and military leaders of insurgent groups active in Iraqi Kurdistan, Tigray and Eritrea (I interviewed several subjects more than once).<sup>118</sup> I also interviewed a handful of former rank-and-file of a few of the organizations and former government military officials, for a total of 66 interviews. I conducted all interviews (but one over Skype) in person (with the help of an interpreter, when not in English or Italian); they lasted between 45 minutes and three hours. I engaged in simultaneous note-taking in all interviews and audio-recorded a dozen of them. All subjects were given the option of anonymity but the vast majority declined it. Most interviews were conducted in Iraqi Kurdistan and in Ethiopia, but about a dozen took place in Europe (the United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and Norway) and the United States.

In research on particular policy decisions there is typically a narrow population of relevant actors and thus random sampling is not the most appropriate methodology.<sup>119</sup> I adopted the following non-random sampling approach: based on secondary literature on the cases, I compiled a list of subjects likely to have access to relevant information and I tried to get in touch

---

<sup>117</sup> On triangulation, see H. J. Davies, “Spies as Informants: Triangulation and Interpretation of Elite Interview Data in the Study of Intelligence and Security Services,” *Politics* 21 (1), 2001: 73-80, and Layna Mosley, “Introduction. ‘Just Talk to People?’ Interviews in Contemporary Political Science,” in Mosley 2013, pp. 22-3.

<sup>118</sup> The case studies below report more specific information on the interview samples for each case and on the individual interviewees.

<sup>119</sup> Tansey 2007; Bleich and Pekkanen 2013, p. 90; Julia F. Lynch “Aligning Sampling Strategies with Analytic Goals,” in Mosley, ed., 2013, pp. 40-4.

by being introduced to them, thus avoiding cold calls whenever possible; in addition, I asked interviewees to suggest other individuals that they thought I should talk to and to introduce me to them, if possible. I mitigated the perils of being trapped within a network of interlinked respondents with the same world view by starting multiple “snowballs” of interview subjects, corresponding to different organizations and factions within them.<sup>120</sup>

### *Case selection*

The two driving concerns in case selection for this dissertation are the sample’s potential representativeness of a larger population and the presence of useful within-case variation on dimensions of theoretical interest, which enables me to advance causal claims for the cases under examination.<sup>121</sup> I consciously decided not to adopt random case selection, due to potential problems of bias and unrepresentativeness associated with a small sample of cases for qualitative analysis, in addition to the competing concern of ensuring useful within-case variation.<sup>122</sup> By contrast, I followed a purposive case selection strategy combining several different criteria identified in the literature for theory development and theory testing.

---

<sup>120</sup> Bleich and Pekkanen 2013, p.87.

<sup>121</sup> Jason Seawright and John Gerring, “Case Selection Techniques in Case Study Research: A Menu of Qualitative and Quantitative Options,” *Political Research Quarterly* 61 (2), 2008: 294-308 (see in particular p. 295).

<sup>122</sup> Gary King, Robert O. Keohane and Sidney Verba (*Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994, pp. 125-6) discuss the potential problem of selection bias associated with random selection of a small sample of case studies. Seawright and Gerring (2008, p. 295) show that randomized case selection with small samples may often lead to substantively unrepresentative samples, even if there is no bias. James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin (“Integrating Qualitative and Quantitative Methods,” in Janet M. Box-Steffensmeier, Henry E. Brady and David Collier, eds., *Oxford Handbook of Political Methodology*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) advocate for random selection, but their rationale is countering researchers’ confirmation bias rather than achieving representativeness. Random selection would be especially problematic for theory building; as Evan Lieberman points out, at this stage of the research project “random selection of cases should absolutely be avoided because such an approach would be tantamount to saying, ‘I don’t have a good theory, and I don’t have an intuition about why a particular case would be illuminating for constructing a theory,’ which is hardly a solid foundation for investigation” (“Nested Analysis as a Mixed-Method Strategy for Comparative Research,” *American Political Science Review* 99 (3), 2005: 435-52, p. 447).

Theory development case study. My theory development case study explores the Kurdish insurgencies against Iraq in the years 1961-88. This case is useful for several reasons: it satisfies the theory's basic scope condition, it meets the deviant and diverse case criteria, and it entailed relative easy access to primary sources.

Iraq's Kurdish insurgencies fulfill the basic scope condition of a multiparty civil war, as more than one rebel group fought against the government for large chunks of the relevant period (1961-88).<sup>123</sup> More crucially, the case fits the criterion of being a deviant or anomalous case for Christia's MWC argument, which I consider the most established and comprehensive alternative explanation of the phenomena under study.<sup>124</sup> As Christia's own coding in her medium-N analysis points out, the case was characterized by overwhelming military superiority by the government, a condition under which her theory does not predict inter-insurgent war, but rather inter-rebel cooperation.<sup>125</sup> This is certainly not the only anomalous case for Christia's theory, so why choose *this one* for theory development? I do not claim that this is an especially deviant case; in the absence of a model with a good statistical fit and a nuanced measure over time and across cases of key independent variables like the balance of power and threat environment, it is

---

<sup>123</sup> The years 1965-1975 are an exception, as in 1965 one of the two rebel groups abandoned the rebel camp by flipping to the government side and was later "absorbed" by the other group; that period is thus excluded from the analysis. In Chapter 3, I provide a rationale for coding the civil war as multi-party in the years up to 1964 contrary to Christia's coding. I exclude the 1990s (which were characterized by significant fighting between the KDP and the PUK) from the analysis because there was no multi-party civil war after the 1991 uprising: unlike the PUK, the KDP did not fight against the government in this period. Moreover, my Kurdish interview subjects displayed much less willingness to discuss episodes of infighting in the 1990s than in earlier periods.

<sup>124</sup> On the deviant case selection criterion, see Seawright and Gerring 2008, p. 302.

<sup>125</sup> Christa 2012, p. 273.

just impossible to assess a given case's distance from the "regression line".<sup>126</sup> A preliminary examination did not suggest features of the case that would disqualify it on the ground of being especially difficult for Christia's argument or particularly idiosyncratic.<sup>127</sup>

Another characteristic that makes the case useful is its diversity, i.e., it displays substantial variation on the dependent variable as Iraq's Kurdish rebels notoriously clashed on multiple occasions. Within-case variation enables my causal inference strategy (as it allow me to see whether the mechanisms envisioned by my theory are in fact at play in rebel groups' decisions to go to war) and guarantees a minimum of representativeness vis-à-vis the larger population (by including both instances of inter-rebel war and peace).<sup>128</sup> Finally, pragmatic

---

<sup>126</sup> As Jack Levy points out, there are fewer well-established rules of case selection for the purpose of theory development than testing ("Case Studies: Types, Designs, and Logics of Inference," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 25 (1), 2008: 1-18, esp. p. 7).

<sup>127</sup> Upon selection, the Iraqi Kurdistan case did reveal itself to be an especially useful deviant case, as it allows me to circumvent some ambiguity in Christia's conceptualization and measurement of her independent variable. In her case studies, Christia uses territorial control as the key indicator of relative power that belligerents keep in mind in their alliance calculations. Due to the challenge of coding this variable for a substantial number of cases, in her medium-N analysis Christia relies on a different, rougher, measure of the balance of power: the relative size of government and rebel forces. The Iraq case offers the advantage of painting a consistent picture of government overwhelming superiority regardless of whether one focuses on territorial control or troop numbers (or other potential indicators like fire-power) thus reducing the plausibility of the objection that the case's anomaly status is a function of the specific measure of the independent variable used. An additional ambiguity with Christia's measure of relative power has to do with whether the relevant territorial control concerns the territory under dispute (in this case the Kurdish areas of Iraq) or the country as a whole. One would intuitively think that what matters is the territorial control of areas being fought over, as this would indicate how close one side is to winning. However, for Christia territorial control is also a source of military power (the more territory a belligerent controls, the broader its access to resources, including manpower) and thus government control of state's territory not under dispute (in this case the Shia and Sunni populated-areas of the country) could be relevant. The Iraqi Kurdistan case allows me to sidestep this issue, because the government was always in control of the bulk of the Kurdish areas and of Iraq as a whole.

<sup>128</sup> See Seawright and Gerring's (2008, pp. 300-1) discussion of the diverse case selection strategy, who observe that "[e]ncompassing a full range of variation is likely to enhance the representativeness of the sample of cases chosen by the researcher." The authors argue that the approach at a minimum requires selecting two cases to capture the full range of values of a dichotomous variable; however, one case can serve the same purpose if it displays longitudinal variation along the relevant dimension. It should be noted that this method does not offer complete representativeness because the dependent variable may predominantly take on a given value in the population and so the presence of the full range of values in a case may entail overrepresentation of rare values. The method, however, ensures that cases in which the values of the independent variables make a given outcome necessary or impossible are not selected.

considerations reinforced the methodological rationales for case selection discussed above: several of the key rebel decision-makers are still alive and fairly accessible (as they are affiliated with the main Iraqi Kurdish parties), while the relatively good security situation in Iraq's Kurdistan Region in 2012 made it a safe post-conflict setting for this kind of research.<sup>129</sup>

The obvious limit of the case is that it presents no variation on the ethnicity dimension (all the rebel groups are Kurdish) and therefore does not allow a full assessment of the corresponding hypothesis. In fact, in keeping with its designation as theory development case study, I developed my argument about the effect of coethnicity on the risk of inter-rebel war during my fieldwork in Iraqi Kurdistan. Nevertheless, the case does allow me to observe an implication of the coethnicity argument and thus potentially to falsify it: in the aftermath of decisive inter-rebel war, the victor should easily manage to operate and recruit from areas previously under the control of its defeated rival(s).

*Theory testing case studies.* The insurgencies raging in Ethiopia in the years 1961-1991, which I break down in two cases – the rebellions in the provinces of Tigray and Eritrea – are my main theory testing case study. My choice was primarily driven by the fact that the case offers a rare opportunity to test qualitatively the coethnicity argument. The difficulty involved in testing this hypothesis with case studies is that often only coethnic rebel groups find themselves fighting the government in close physical proximity to each other and thus only coethnics tend to be plausible candidates for inter-rebel fighting – i.e., there rarely is within-case variation on the relevant independent variable to exploit for causal inference. Starting from 1975, this case was characterized by multiparty rebellions in both the adjacent provinces of Ethiopia and Tigray,

---

<sup>129</sup> David Romano, "Conducting Research in the Middle East's Conflict Zones," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 39 (3), 2006: 439-42. Moreover, much information on Iraqi government's decision-making (in particular during the 1980s) is now available in the form of captured documents in the Saddam Hussein Regime Collection at National Defense University's Conflict Records Research Center.



pitting, respectively, Eritrean and Tigrayan rebels against Amhara-dominated Ethiopian government forces. The case thus allows me to assess whether, controlling for physical proximity, rebel groups are more likely to fight across or within ethnic boundaries. Moreover, based on preliminary examination of the history of the case before embarking on in-depth study and fieldwork, the Ethiopian insurgencies displayed significant variation in inter-rebel fighting. Finally, the case provided a mixed picture in terms of ease of access to primary sources. Upon consultation with several country experts, due to concerns about my security and that of my local informants, I decided not try to conduct field research in Eritrea (which, in any case, would have required a research visa, exceedingly difficult to obtain for the country).<sup>130</sup> However, I managed to contact and interview many former high level members of several Eritrean groups who currently live in Ethiopia, the United States and several European countries, where I also conducted my interviews for the Tigray case study.

Shadow case studies. I conducted shadow case studies based on secondary literature of the civil wars in Lebanon (1975-89), Sri Lanka (1983-2009) and Syria (2011-). These are multi-party ethnic civil wars with multiple episodes of inter-rebel fighting and thus offer several opportunities for within-case controlled comparisons.<sup>131</sup> Each of them has also distinct benefits:

---

<sup>130</sup> For a discussion of some relevant issues related to conducting research under conditions of authoritarianism and the risk of political violence, see Romano 2006; and Janine A. Clark, "Field Research Methods in the Middle East," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 39 (3), 2006: 417-22.

<sup>131</sup> Ideally, one would want to select cases for external validity tests based on substantial within-case variation on the independent variable(s); however, obtaining fine-grained data to measure balance of power and threat environment would require a comparable amount of immersion in the weeds of the case as conducting the case study itself, while the occurrence of infighting is more easily observable. Given the paucity of available process evidence for the shadow case studies, the benefits of substantial within-case variation on the dependent variable for the most part are not related to observing the mechanisms envisioned by the theory multiple times but to controlling for case-specific features. For this set of cases, I mostly rely on within-case congruence, which allows me to ascertain whether the independent and dependent variables covary as the theory suggests, holding constant background features of the case. Selecting cases with no variation on the dependent variable would make it extremely difficult to rule out the possibility that the outcome is being determined by some constant case-specific factor that makes inter-rebel war either highly unlikely or highly likely.

Lebanon's civil war allows me to test the coethnicity hypothesis, as it features both coethnic and non-coethnic armed groups operating in close proximity and thus with opportunities to fight each other; the Syrian civil war permits me to assess whether window theory is relevant jihadi groups, a relatively common presence in civil wars over the past decade; and Sri Lanka's Tamil insurgency offers a chance to explore inter-rebel dynamics beyond the Middle Eastern and African scope of all other cases.

### ***Definitions and operationalization***

*Inter-rebel war.* Consistent with prevailing definitions of civil war, I consider inter-rebel war a purposeful, major violent clash between distinct rebel organizations. The large scale of the violence helps distinguish inter-rebel war from low-level clashes, which are pervasive in civil war settings. Both the participants that I interviewed and case specialists tend to distinguish phases in which inter-rebel violence is limited at low levels from phases in which it occurs on a large scale (they often use expressions like "skirmishes" to refer the former type of inter-rebel interaction, and "war" and "civil war" to refer to the latter).<sup>132</sup> The purposeful nature of the violence and the fact it occurs between rebel groups (rather than individuals or small units belonging to those groups) also help differentiate wars from skirmishes: a series of clashes involving rank-and-file or low-level commanders would not amount to inter-rebel war unless at some point there was an explicit or tacit decision by the group's leadership to fight. Inter-rebel violence does not need to be protracted for it to amount to war, as a group may well be able to wipe out a rival very quickly.

---

<sup>132</sup> Cunningham, Bakke and Seymour (2012, p. 78) use a dichotomous measure of violence between organizations of self-determination movements, considering any fighting, including nonlethal clashes, as they are trying to explain a different phenomenon than the object of this study.

Operationalizing the proposed definition of inter-rebel war poses some challenges. Civil war datasets use numerical thresholds of fatalities to determine whether an event should be included. However, rigidly following this approach would not be very helpful for my purposes: if the organizations in question are large and there are many opportunities for contact, they may engage in a sufficient number of skirmishes to cause a large number of deaths, even if the phenomenon under examination does not correspond to the concept of inter-rebel war. Moreover, the available data about skirmishes' death-tolls is typically very poor. Conversely, inter-rebel violent interactions that would appear to fit the definition of inter-rebel war may cause a lower number of deaths than a large number of isolated skirmishes. For example, a rebel group may coerce a much weaker rival to abandon the field with a display of overwhelming military superiority, which may only cause a small number of deaths in battle as the losing side concedes defeat rather than fighting to the last man. In light of these considerations, I adopt the following operationalization criteria for my case studies.<sup>133</sup> First, there has to be some evidence that the episode under examination reflects an explicit or tacit decision by the organization's leadership, i.e., independent actions of individuals or local commanders do not qualify. Second, repeated battles between units of different organizations must occur, or a major battle with hundreds of fighters must take place, or the main headquarters of one of the rebel groups must be the target of a major attack.

*Rebel group.* I define rebel groups as independent organizations taking part in a civil war on the opposite side of the government. I consider organizations as independent if there is evidence that they make autonomous decisions about alignments and the strategic use of force (i.e., about initiation and termination of their anti-government activities as well as their overall military strategy), and that they

---

<sup>133</sup> For the large-N part of the dissertation, following Fjelde and Nilsson (2012), I use the numerical threshold of 25 battle-related deaths per year to identify instances of inter-rebel war.

have exclusive authority over their armed forces.<sup>134</sup> Independence distinguishes rebel groups from subunits (typically referred to as factions) of which rebel organizations are composed.<sup>135</sup>

Coethnicity. I consider rebel organizations as coethnic if they are *linked* to the same ethnic group. My theoretical argument about the effects of ethnicity stresses coethnic rebel groups' overlapping ambitions and cumulativeness of resources; thus I posit two conditions for rebel organizations to be considered as linked to an ethnic group: 1) the rebel organization announced political aspirations directly relate to the ethnic group's fate and 2) the overwhelming majority of the rank-and-file *or* of the leadership of the rebel organization belongs to the ethnic group.<sup>136</sup> In the presence of sub-ethnic differences between rebel groups, I consider rebel groups as coethnic if they are engaged in armed combat against a common "ethnic-other" government, articulate their struggle in terms of an overarching common ethnic cause and recruit (or are in principle willing to recruit) across the sub-ethnic cleavages.

---

<sup>134</sup> Most rebel groups have an announced name, but I do not consider this a necessary criterion for my case studies (contrary to, for example, the Armed Conflict Dataset, presented in Gleditsch et al. 2002). As the Iraq case study in Chapter 3 illustrates, a rebel organization may display full autonomy in key strategic decisions and exclusive control of its armed forces while operating under a banner shared with other groups.

<sup>135</sup> There may be, of course, cases in which in practice it is extremely difficult to distinguish between rebel groups and factions.

<sup>136</sup> These criteria are similar to those adopted in the ACD2EPR dataset (Julian Wucherpfennig et al., "Ethnicity, the State, and the Duration of Civil War," *World Politics* 64 (1), 2012: 79-115). However, the second criterion is different in some important respects. The ACD2EPR dataset requires that "a significant number of the group members actively participate in the organization's combat operations" (Wucherpfennig et al. 2012, p. 96). My criterion is both broader and more specific. On the one hand, given that I am interested in capturing rebel groups' perceptions of the degree to which other organizations can compete for the same pool of resources, it makes sense to code as linked to an ethnic group not only organizations with an ethnic-based rank-and-file, but also organizations whose leadership is mostly comprised of members of that ethnic group (as that suggests potential ability to recruit rank-and-file). On the other hand, my criterion requires a majority of ethnic leadership or membership, rather than an unspecified "significant number". The first criterion (the rebel group's ethnic political aspirations) does not necessarily mean that the "ethnic cause" needs to have priority over other political objectives (e.g., a radical change of the entire country's political system), but simply that the rebel organization consistently states as part of its political agenda goals related to the ethnic group's rights or wellbeing. For a discussion of a series of criteria that researchers may utilize to identify ethnic political parties (potentially extendable to rebel groups), see Kanchan Chandra, "What Is An Ethnic Party?" *Party Politics* 17 (2), 2011: 151-69.

Windows of opportunity and vulnerability. Window theory of inter-rebel war shares similarities with arguments that focus on political opportunity and threat environment as explanatory variables for different political phenomena. These arguments have been criticized for not clearly conceptualizing and measuring ex ante opportunities and threats, which are instead identified by looking back after their purported effects have materialized.<sup>137</sup> Ensuring the falsifiability of my argument requires being able to identify the existence of windows of opportunity and vulnerability independently of whether inter-rebel war occurred, so as to detect potential instances of rebel groups fighting each other in the absence of windows and of windows failing to prompt inter-rebel war.

Whenever possible, I code the existence of windows (both when inter-rebel war occurs and when peace prevails) with a combination of decision-making evidence and rebel leaders' and third-parties' (scholars, journalists and other observers) assessments of the defining features of windows, as the different types of evidence complement each other. As noted, the most powerful kind of evidence are rebel decision-makers' statements that they launched an attack due to their perception of an opportunity to get rid of a rival (at an acceptable cost) or the urgency to confront a mounting threat posed by it (in spite of the potential steep costs that infighting entailed), and that they abstained from attacking in other moments due to the absence of comparable opportunities or vulnerabilities. This direct decision-making evidence largely addresses problems of authors' "retroactive" coding of windows; here triangulation with participants' and third parties' description of the key features of the situation plays the ancillary role of assuaging concerns about biases in rebel leaders' accounts.

---

<sup>137</sup> William A. Gamson and David S. Meyer, "Framing Political Opportunity," in McAdam, McCarthy and Zald 1996; Jeffrey Frieden, "Actors and Preferences in International Relations," in David A. Lake and Robert Powell, eds., *Strategic Choice and International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

However, when sufficiently fine-grained process evidence is not available, it is necessary to rely on participants' and observers' assessments of the constitutive elements of window, which puts a premium on transparent and replicable coding criteria.

As noted, windows of opportunity are characterized by an imbalance of power between rebel groups and the absence of a serious and imminent government threat. Whenever possible, I measure rebel relative power with information about the perceptions of rebel leaders. In particular, I ask them about their perception at a given time of the organization's overall military strength compared to other groups and of specific aspects of the balance of power (e.g., troop numbers and armaments) as well as about their assessment at that time of the likely outcome of inter-rebel war. I corroborate and supplement leaders' recollections with other subjects' and third-parties' reports about the inter-rebel balance of power, focusing on four dimensions of power whenever data is available: rebel groups' troop numbers, weaponry at their disposal, organizational cohesion (measured as relative absence of splits and feuds among leaders and pervasive indiscipline among the rank-and-file) and tactical-operational skills (often proxied by previous battlefield experience).<sup>138</sup> In the absence of direct evidence of rebel leaders' perception of the balance of power, I code a rebel group as stronger if it starkly outranks another group in a net number of dimensions of power for which I have information.<sup>139</sup>

---

<sup>138</sup> On organizational cohesion (of both small units and broader organizations) as a cause of military effectiveness for national armies and rebel groups, see Edward A. Shils and Morris Janowitz, "Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 12 (2), 1948: 280-31; Stephen Peter Rosen, *Societies and Military Power: India and Its Armies* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996); Paul D. Kenny, "Structural Integrity and Cohesion in Insurgent Organizations: Evidence from Protracted Conflicts in Ireland and Burma," *International Studies Review* 12 (4), 2010: 533-55; and Staniland 2012b. On tactical and operational skill (or force employment) as a key determinant of battlefield outcomes, see Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); "Allies, Airpower, and Modern Warfare: The Afghan Model in Afghanistan and Iraq," *International Security* 30 (3), 2005/06: 161-76.

<sup>139</sup> For example, if information is available on two dimensions of relative power, a group will be coded as stronger if starkly superior in at least one dimension and at least roughly equal in the other dimension.

Similarly, whenever possible I code the existence of a serious and imminent government threat with information about the perceptions of rebel leaders, by asking them what kinds of military operations the government forces were conducting at a given time and the extent to which they felt that the survival of their organization was under immediate threat. I corroborate and complement leaders' assessments of government threat with information reported by other subjects and third-party observers; I code a serious and imminent threat if government forces are engaged in a major offensive or if there are indications (for example, troop movements or the establishment of more hardline executive) that government's military pressure could suddenly escalate. By contrast, in the context of guerrilla warfare, I consider situations in which the rebels initiate most of the engagements and thus can set the pace of their losses as characterized by limited government threat. In conventional warfare, a permissive threat environment would typically be characterized by static battle lines, which previous interactions have shown that the rebels can comfortably defend in the absence of significant escalation of government attacks. Government threat is also low when the rebels are making major gains on the battlefield, which I operationalize as a trend of pitched battles in which the insurgents get the upper hand and/or the fall of government strongholds under insurgent pressure. In this scenario, I do not expect inter-rebel war due to the high opportunity cost of forgoing major gains (and even ultimate victory) against the government.

Windows of vulnerability are characterized by a sharp deterioration of a group's power position or an imminent and serious threat posed by another rebel group, which can only be addressed with a high-risk, low-chance of success military adventure. A sharp decline in relative power may take different forms, but it will typically manifest itself as a group's inability to sustain military activities and retain fighters, due to dwindling finances and supplies (in

particular, weapons and ammunition, but also food), or to keep up with a rapidly growing rival. I code the trend in the balance of power with information about rebel leaders' perceptions, which I triangulate and complement with information from other observers. Similarly, whenever available, I rely on direct evidence of rebel leaders' perceptions of the odds of success and risks involved in the gamble for resurrection; this evidence is supplemented with information from other sources about the balance of power, from which I infer the ex-ante likelihood of success of a given initiative.

Serious and imminent threats from other groups may emerge in a variety of ways. Sometimes threats arise endogenously, so to speak, as a rebel group finds itself surrounded by an alliance of hostile organizations. Rebel groups' threats to each other may also interact with threats posed by the government: for example, the existence of an aggressive rival will be typically made more threatening by the prospect of a government offensive down the road, as it exposes the group to the risk of a two-front war. Other times, threats may emerge exogenously, as in cases in which a group loses a safe-haven in a friendly neighboring country and thus suddenly becomes more vulnerable to attack. Again, I code the threat posed by other rebel groups with evidence of rebel leaders' perceptions of the situation and information from other observers and the secondary literature about developments on the battlefield (in particular about the formation of hostile rebel alliances, the loss of safe havens and the prospect of intervention by hostile third-parties).

## **5. Conclusions**

This chapter has presented my theoretical argument: wars between rebel groups occur when they face windows of opportunity or vulnerability, which are a function of the inter-rebel balance of



power, groups' threat environment and coethnic rebels' overlapping bases of support. Unraveling the puzzle of inter-rebel war requires paying heed to fine-grained measures of belligerents' capabilities and battlefield developments as well as to rebel groups' mobilization bases. Far from being a mere façade for material calculations, rebel groups' shared ethnic identity amplifies both defensive and aggressive motives for inter-rebel war, as it affects groups' threat perception and their ability to expand resources at rivals' expense. The next two chapters, respectively, present my theory-development case study – the Kurdish insurgencies against Iraq – my main theory-testing case studies – the insurgencies in the Ethiopian provinces of Eritrea and Tigray.

## **Chapter 3**

### **The Kurdish Insurgencies in Iraq, 1961-1988**

Excluding Anfal, more Kurds in Iraq have died at the hands of fellow Kurds than of Arabs.  
- Senior Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) member

#### **1. Introduction**

At various points in the years 1961-1988, Iraq's Kurdish rebel groups waged war against each other to exploit opportunities to launch hegemonic bids or to extricate themselves from positions of deep vulnerability, despite the presence of an overwhelmingly powerful common enemy – Baghdad – bent on genocidal violence against their people. Rather than promoting solidarity and cooperation against the government, coethnicity stoked violent competition between the Kurdish groups for control of their overlapping bases of support.

This chapter presents a case study of the Kurdish insurgencies against Iraq, which served as the dissertation's theory development case. Through detailed processes-tracing of insurgent leaders' decision-making, I show how the opening and closing of windows of opportunity and vulnerability cast light on the trajectories of war and cooperation between the groups.

The remainder of the chapter is organized as follows. Section 2 details the array of primary sources (in particular interviews I conducted in Iraq) and secondary literature I rely on to get at the underlying logic of intra-Kurdish fighting. Section 3 presents an historical overview of the case. Section 4 zeroes in on the instances of inter-rebel war to be explained and assesses my

theory's empirical fit. In section 5, I address alternative explanations and endogeneity concerns. Section 6 concludes by summarizing my findings.

## 2. Sources

The case study presented in this chapter relies primarily on original interviews with former Iraqi Kurdish rebel leaders and their memoirs, interviews with Iraqi government officials conducted by other scholars,<sup>140</sup> documents from the Conflict Records Research Center's Saddam Hussein collection,<sup>141</sup> and the secondary literature. In the period October-December 2012, I interviewed twenty former political leaders and military commanders (seven of them twice) of former Kurdish insurgent organizations and two lower-rank members (one of them twice), for a total of 31 semi-structured interviews.<sup>142</sup> Since my goal was to trace specific decisions about inter-rebel war, the population of relevant subjects consisted of former members of rebel organizations that may have participated to the decision-making processes I am interested in or may be reliably informed about them.<sup>143</sup> Thus I focused on individuals that were in positions of political leadership or military command in the relevant organizations at the time of the events (the lower-

---

<sup>140</sup> Kevin M. Woods, Williamson Murray and Thomas Holaday, "Saddam's War: An Iraqi Military Perspective of the Iran-Iraq War," *McNair Paper* 70, National Defense University, 2009; Kevin Woods et al., *Saddam's Generals: Perspectives of the Iran-Iraq War* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Defense Analyses, 2011).

<sup>141</sup> The collection consists of over 900 Iraqi government's documents (for a total of almost 53,000 pages, including transcripts of recordings and English translations from Arabic) captured by US forces after the 2003 invasion (only a fraction of the captured records have been declassified, translated, and included in the collection). The well-known "Saddam tapes" (a set of audio- and video-tapes of meetings in which Saddam Hussein took part) are only a small part of the collection – corresponding to about 4,000 pages (Kevin M. Woods, David D. Palkki and Mark E. Stout, eds., *The Saddam Tapes: The Inner Workings of a Tyrant Regime, 1978-2001*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>142</sup> See Appendix 1 for the list of my interviewees. For short biographies of many (but by no means all), see Michael M. Gunter, *Historical Dictionary of the Kurds* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2011), and Beth K. Dougherty and Edmund A. Ghareb, *Historical Dictionary of Iraq* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2013).

<sup>143</sup> See the discussion of my interview methodology in Chapter 2.

ranked former members I interviewed are individuals that I contacted to be introduced to other subjects, although their accounts were helpful in providing information on several aspects of the activities of their respective organizations).

Before embarking on my fieldwork, I compiled a list of possible interviewees, based on the secondary literature. Upon my arrival to Iraq, I shared the list with my initial local contacts (mostly Kurdish journalists), asking for help in getting in touch with the people in question (ideally by making introductions or even setting up appointments for me) and for suggestions of individuals with a similar profile to be added to my list. This helped me start multiple interview “snowballs”, which I kept rolling by asking my interviewees to suggest other individuals that could be useful sources for my research.<sup>144</sup> I conducted all interviews in person (with the help of an interpreter for about half of them).<sup>145</sup> In addition to the interviews, the case study relies on the three-volume memoirs of Nawshirwan Mustafa (de facto deputy leader of the PUK in the period under study and head of Gorran party at the moment of this writing), which Dr. Kamal Soleimani translated for me from Kurdish Sorani in New York City.

I certainly cannot claim to have reached saturation of the population of potential interviewees. However, by generating multiple snowballs – corresponding to different political parties, former rebel organizations and factions thereof – I cautioned against the risk of tapping into a single network of individuals with the same views and biases.

---

<sup>144</sup> This process was also helpful to drop off the list several individuals that had died but on whose whereabouts I had not managed to find information in the secondary literature and on the internet.

<sup>145</sup> My research assistants/interpreters (typically undergraduate students at the University of Kurdistan Hawler (in Erbil, Iraq) also helped in the search for contact information and in setting up appointments with non-English speakers.

### 3. Overview of the Kurdish Insurgencies in Iraq (1961-1988)

The fall of the Hashemite monarchy in 1958 promised to be a key turning point in the history of tense relations between Iraq and its Kurdish minority since the country's birth, following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>146</sup> For the first time, the provisional constitution recognized the Kurds' national rights within the Iraqi state; moreover, the new President, General Abdul Karim Qassem, forged an alliance with Kurdish leader Mullah Mustafa Barzani to consolidate his regime. However, it was not long before the relationship between the two deteriorated, as Qassem became concerned with Barzani's expanding influence in the Kurdish areas and the latter grew frustrated with the absence of progress towards Kurdish autonomy. Clashes between Barzani's forces and the government started in September, as a result of the escalation of a revolt launched by Barzani's tribal allies against Baghdad's economic reforms. A major government offensive against Barzani's forces ensued.<sup>147</sup>

In addition to being a powerful tribal leader and a charismatic ethno-national figure, Barzani was the honorary president of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). However, the party was under the actual control of urban intellectuals, in particular Ibrahim Ahmed and Jalal Talabani – KDP's secretary-general and influential politburo member, respectively. For the sake of clarity, henceforth I refer to the "Barzani faction" and the "Ahmed-Talabani faction" as the two political organizations jostling for control of the Kurdish nationalist movement in Iraq in the years 1961-1970.<sup>148</sup> The two organizations were clearly coethnic, as they both aspired to

---

<sup>146</sup> For an overview of this earlier history, see David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004, 3rd ed.), pp. 151-83.

<sup>147</sup> Edgar O'Ballance, *The Kurdish Revolt: 1961-1970* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1973), pp. 57-78; Edmund Ghareeb, *The Kurdish Question in Iraq* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University, 1981), pp. 35-40; Sa'ad Jawad, *Iraq & the Kurdish Question, 1958-1970* (London: Ithaca Press, 1981), pp. 37- 67; Nader Entessar, *Kurdish Politics in the Middle* (East Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), p. 81.

autonomy for Iraq's Kurds and had exclusively Kurdish memberships; but they had different ideological orientations and partially distinct social bases: the Ahmed-Talabani faction was leftist and its strongholds were the major centers in the Sorani-speaking areas (central and southern Iraqi Kurdistan); Barzani's faction held more conservative views and drew most of its support from Kurmanji-speaking tribes in the Badinan region (northern Iraqi Kurdistan).<sup>149</sup>

The Ahmed-Talabani faction was initially reluctant to take part in the rebellion, due to its perceived tribal character. But eventually, in early 1962, Ahmed and Talabani rallied on Barzani's side, fearing that his defeat or an agreement between him and Qassem would spell their faction's fate, while also hoping that in due time they would manage to become the vanguard of the nationalist struggle, in spite of the faction's stark military inferiority vis-à-vis Barzani's forces. On his part, Barzani saw the Ahmed-Talabani faction as a potential future challenge to his authority but could not afford to forgo its military contribution in the fight against the government.<sup>150</sup>

The first two years of the war were characterized by a seesaw pattern of government offensives, which would get bogged down in the mountains, followed by Kurdish counterattacks in moments of government military weakness or political turmoil in Baghdad. For most of this period, the Kurds controlled a stretch of territory of varying depth along Iraq's mountainous border, extending from Zakho (in the north-west) to Khanakin (in the south-east) (see Figure 3.1 below), while resorting to hit-and-run attacks elsewhere in the region.

---

<sup>148</sup> See below my discussion of why the two organizations should be treated as distinct rebel groups in the years 1962-1964 based on the definition provided in Chapter 2.

<sup>149</sup> Martin Van Bruinessen, "The Kurds between Iran and Iraq," *MERIP Middle East Report* 141, 1986: 14-27 (esp. pp. 16-7).

<sup>150</sup> Ismet Chériff Vanly, *Kurdistan Irakien Entité Nationale. Étude de la Révolution de 1961* (Neuchâtel: Éditions de la Baconnière, 1970), pp. 99-100; O'Ballance 1973, p. 78-81; Jawad 1981, pp. 80-5.

In February 1964, in the aftermath of a military coup that significantly weakened the Iraqi military, the government and Barzani reached a ceasefire agreement. The Ahmed-Talabani faction denounced Barzani as a “sell-out” and argued that the Kurds should press their military advantage. In the following months, the long-simmering struggle for control of the Kurdish movement escalated and finally came to a head: in July, Barzani sent a military contingent to the Ahmed-Talabani’s headquarters, which defeated and expelled the faction to Iran.<sup>151</sup> This was the first episode of inter-rebel war.

Subsequently, negotiations between Barzani and Baghdad over Kurdish self-administration stalled and, in April 1965, the government launched a new offensive. Barzani then allowed the members of the Ahmed-Talabani faction back into Kurdistan, absorbing the rank-and-files in his organization while keeping its leaders under close surveillance (Ahmed remained in exile).<sup>152</sup> In a stunning turn of events, however, Talabani and a group of loyal elements left the Barzani camp in January 1966 and, with government support, started fighting against the Barzani faction.<sup>153</sup>

The following three years witnessed similarly indecisive fighting, with an alternation of massive, yet unsuccessful, government offensives and phases in which Baghdad “outsourced” the bulk of the anti-Barzani operations to the reestablished Ahmed-Talabani faction, which had de facto become a pro-government militia.<sup>154</sup> In 1969, the newly in power Baath government

---

<sup>151</sup> Vanly 1970, pp. 107 and 145-177; O’Ballance 1973, pp. 78-121; Ghareeb 1981, pp. 66-7; Jawad 1981, pp. 142-73.

<sup>152</sup> Author’s interview with Dr. Mahmoud Osman (Barzani’s close collaborator), 10 December, 2012, Erbil, Iraq.

<sup>153</sup> Vanly 1970, pp. 224 and 259-263; O’Ballance 1973, pp. 125-7 and 133-5; Jawad 1981, pp. 173-180 and 218, note 52.

realized that it was not strong enough to deal at the same time with an increasingly more assertive Iran across the border and the ongoing Kurdish insurgency in the north (generously supported by Tehran). Baghdad thus decided to appease Barzani by granting significant autonomy to the Kurds, enshrined in the agreement of 11 March 1970.<sup>155</sup> Among other important concessions, Baghdad ceased its support for the Ahmed-Talabani faction, and its members were reabsorbed as individuals into a KDP under Barzani's unchallenged authority.<sup>156</sup>

---

<sup>154</sup> O'Ballance 1973, pp. 137 and 151-2; Jawad 1981, pp. 205-14 and 241-251; Van Bruinessen 1986, p. 22, The government had also relied since 1961 on Kurdish militias mostly formed from tribes hostile to Barzani, derogatorily referred to by the nationalists as "jash" ("little donkeys").

<sup>155</sup> Ghareeb 1981, p. 136; Jawad 1981, pp. 250-2; McDowall 2004, pp. 326-7; Ofra Bengio, *The Kurds of Iraq: Building a State Within a State* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2012), p. 36.

<sup>156</sup> O'Ballance 1973, pp. 159-163; Ghareeb 1981, pp. 86 and 100. According to Adel Murad, the 6,000 peshmergas under Talabani were integrated on an individual basis in separate regional branches of the KDP's forces (author's interview, 15-16 November 2012, Sulaimania, Iraq; Adel Murad was Barzani's affiliate at the time of the events and later one of PUK's founders; he was a high-ranking PUK member at the time of the interview, 15-16 November, 2012, Sulaimania, Iraq). Talabani was readmitted in the KDP but sent to Beirut (and later Damascus) as its representative in a soft form of exile, while Ahmed did not return to Kurdistan (Kamran Karadaghi, "The Two Gulf Wars: The Kurds on the World Stage, 1979-1992," in Gérard Chaliand, ed., *People Without a Country: The Kurds and Kurdistan*, London: Zed Press, 1993, p. 219; Michael M. Gunter, *The Kurdish Predicament in Iraq: A Political Analysis*, New York: St. Martin's Press 1999, p. 24; McDowall 2004, p. 343).



**Figure 3.1: Map of Iraqi Kurdistan**



However, disputes over implementation of the agreement and important unresolved issues emerged soon afterwards.<sup>157</sup> Emboldened by promises of US and Iranian support, Barzani's bargaining position stiffened. War re-erupted in the spring of 1974 as Baghdad sent a large force to relieve besieged army garrisons in Kurdish-controlled territory. The ensuing government offensive made substantial inroads and by the winter the Kurdish forces were reduced to a strip of territory near the Iranian border, which they could defend only with Iranian

<sup>157</sup> Ghareeb 1981, pp. 147-74; McDowall 2004, pp. 327-35.

artillery support. Baghdad became convinced that the only solution to its Kurdish problem was to placate its foreign sponsor, while Tehran calculated that the time had come to reap the diplomatic benefits of the pressure it had imposed on Iraq through its Kurdish proxy.<sup>158</sup> In March 1975, the two governments caught the world and the rebels by surprise with the announcement of the Algiers agreement, by which Iran undertook to stop supporting the Kurdish insurgency and sealing off the border in exchange for Iraqi concessions in the long-standing Shatt al-Arab border dispute. Bereft of vital external support, Barzani ordered his forces to stop fighting and the Kurdish rebellion swiftly collapsed.<sup>159</sup>

New organizations emerged in the power vacuum created by the defeat and dissolution of Barzani's KDP. In the summer of 1975, Talabani announced from Damascus the formation of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which started military operations against Iraq the following year. In 1976, Barzani's sons, Idris and Massoud, in cooperation with other former KDP elements, created the KDP-Provisional Leadership (later renamed KDP; henceforth, I refer to it as KDP for simplicity's sake). The group resumed operations in Kurdistan shortly after the PUK. In the second half of 1979, the Socialist Party of Kurdistan in Iraq (henceforth, the Socialist Party) and the Kurdistan Branch of the Communist Party of Iraq (henceforward, the

---

<sup>158</sup> Asadollah Alam, *The Shah and I: The Confidential Diary of Iran's Royal Court, 1969-1977* (New York: Tauris, 1991), pp. 417-8; McDowall 2004, pp. 337-9; Bengio 2012, pp. 132-42; Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1976, volume XXVII, Iran, Iraq, 1973-1976, Documents 275-6, 279.

<sup>159</sup> Ghareeb 1981, pp. 156-74; Bengio 2012, pp. 142-8.

Communist Party) established a military presence in Sorani areas, where the PUK also operated.<sup>160</sup>

In the years preceding the Iran-Iraq war, there were skirmishes between the KDP and the PUK, as Talabani's group tried to extend its activities from the Sorani areas to the Badinan region – the KDP's stronghold in northern Iraqi Kurdistan. These low-level clashes culminated in a major battle in the spring of 1978, in which the PUK was badly mauled – the second episode of inter-rebel war.<sup>161</sup>

As the Iran-Iraq war started in the fall of 1980, the various Kurdish groups took advantage of the redeployment of the Iraqi army from Kurdistan to the southern front to rapidly expand their forces and areas of operations. For a few years after their 1978 fight, the antagonism between the KDP and the PUK was largely confined to hostile propaganda and competing “diplomatic” initiatives, as the two organizations did not frontally challenge the rival's control of its stronghold.<sup>162</sup>

---

<sup>160</sup> Van Bruinessen 1986, pp. 22-26; Nawshirwan Mustafa, *From the Danube Shores to the Nawzang Valley: Political Events in Iraqi Kurdistan from 1975 to 1978* (Iraqi Kurdistan, 1997), pp. 43-65 (translated from Kurdish Sorani for the author by Dr. Kamal Soleimani); Chris Kutschera, *Le Defi Kurde, ou, Le Reve Fou de l'Independence* (Paris: Bayard éditions 1997), pp. 31-43; McDowall 2004, pp. 343-7. The Socialist Party came into existence in August 1979 as one of the constitutive PUK's factions (the Social Democratic Movement) splintered off and merged with a small group led by Dr. Mahmud Osman, formerly a close collaborator of Barzani. The Communist Party found refuge in the Kurdish mountains in the fall of 1979, after the Baath expelled it from the ruling National Front and violently targeted its members (Kutschera 1997, pp. 43 and 46).

<sup>161</sup> Van Bruinessen 1986, p. 24.

<sup>162</sup> Author's interview with Shores Hadji (PUK's commander during the Iran-Iraq war; he was a Gorran party's member of the Iraqi Parliament at the time of the interview), 10 December, 2012, Sulaimania, Iraq; author's interview with Mohammad “Hama” Tofiq (early high-ranking member of the PUK; he was responsible for the external relations of Gorran party at the time of the interview), 11 December, 2012, Sulaimania, Iraq; author's interview with Farid Asasard (responsible for PUK's communications from 1978; high-ranking party member at the time of the interview), 13 December, 2012, Sulaimania, Iraq; author's interview with Mala Baxtiar, (PUK's commander since the creation of the organization and politburo member at the time of the interview), 15 December, 2002, Sulaimania, Iraq.

In the spring of 1983, a complex series of alliance maneuvers in the Kurdish camp and battlefield developments in the Iran-Iraq war prompted the resumption of large-scale intra-Kurdish fighting – the third episode of inter-rebel war. The PUK found itself surrounded by hostile forces: it was fighting the Iraqi government, but it was also facing an increasingly assertive alliance of all other armed organizations active in Kurdistan (the National Democratic Front, led by the KDP) and the prospect of an imminent invasion of Iraqi Kurdistan by Iran, which was allied with the KDP and hostile to the PUK. The PUK responded by attacking the Socialists' and Communists' headquarters and expelling their forces (and those of the KDP that they were hosting) from the Sorani areas, which became the PUK's undisputed fiefdom.<sup>163</sup>

Albeit successful, this attack, on top of six years of anti-government struggle, left the PUK in a weakened position. In late 1983, Talabani thus decided to accept Baghdad's offer to negotiate the terms of an extensive Kurdish autonomy and the two sides declared a ceasefire. Negotiations, however, broke down a year later and the PUK resumed its fight against Baghdad.<sup>164</sup>

As it had done before, the PUK strove to avoid fighting on multiple fronts and thus made reconciliatory gestures towards the other Kurdish organizations and Iran. By now Iran was more willing to cooperate with the PUK, as Tehran's hopes of a rapid military victory against Baghdad had been shaken by the emergence of a grinding stalemate in the spring of 1984.<sup>165</sup> After several

---

<sup>163</sup> Van Bruinessen 1986, pp. 19 and 25-6.

<sup>164</sup> Kutschera 1997, pp. 70-5; Nawshirwan Mustafa, *Going Around in Circles: The Inside Story of Events in Iraqi Kurdistan, 1984-1988* (Iraqi Kurdistan, 1999), pp. 72-85 (translated from Kurdish Sorani for the author by Dr. Kamal Soleimani); McDowall 2004, pp. 348-51.

<sup>165</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman and Abraham R. Wagner, *The Lessons of Modern War, Volume II: The Iran-Iraq War* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990), pp. 178-216; McDowall 2004, pp. 351-2; Joost R. Hiltermann, *A Poisonous Affair: America, Iraq, and the Gassing of Halabja* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 90-2; Steven

extremely costly and ultimately unsuccessful attempts at breakthrough in the south in 1986 and 1987, in late 1987 Iran refocused its energies on the Kurdish front: it launched major offensives there and intensified its support for the Kurdish insurgents, leading to some territorial advances by the anti-Baghdad forces in early 1988. However, the tide was soon to turn in Iraq's favor. In the spring, the Iraqi forces were able to retake much of the territory lost in the previous months in Kurdistan; more importantly, the thinning of Iranian defenses in the south (due to redeployments in Kurdistan) created the conditions for a series of successful Iraqi offensives – the first ones since 1981. As Baghdad's forces were now in a position to threaten Iranian territory and military victory by Tehran appeared extremely unlikely, a militarily and economically exhausted Iran accepted Iraq's earlier ceasefire proposal. Following the withdrawal of Iranian forces from Kurdistan, in the late summer Iraq crushed the Kurdish resistance with a series of attacks against the remaining rebel strongholds, indiscriminately targeting militants and civilians on a massive scale in the course of the infamous "Anfal" campaign.<sup>166</sup> The Kurds would not rise again until after the US-led intervention in 1991.<sup>167</sup>

---

R. Ward, *Immortal: A Military History of Iran and Its Armed Forces* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2009), pp. 265-6.

<sup>166</sup> Cordesman and Wagner 1990, pp. 353-403; McDowall 2004, pp. 352-60. The operations in the summer of 1988 constituted the final phase of the Anfal campaign – a series of major assaults on rebel-controlled areas started by the Iraqi government in February 1988, including the use of chemical weapons.

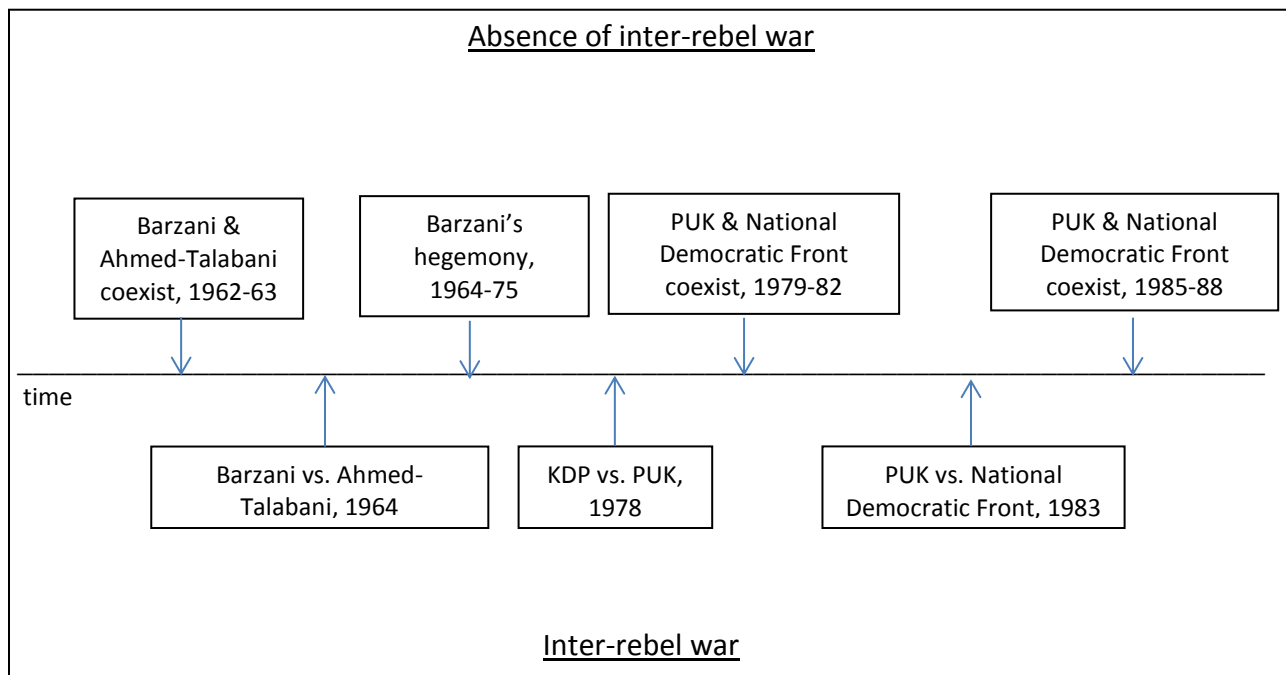
<sup>167</sup> My analysis ends in 1988 because the subsequent period does not meet my scope condition of multiple rebel groups, as only the PUK engaged in sustained anti-government violence after the brief episode of the 1991 uprising. Moreover, the fact that my Kurdish subjects were much more reluctant to speak about the 1990s than earlier history strengthened my decision to focus my analysis on the 1961-88 period. I nonetheless intend to add a brief section on the PUK-KDP war in the 1990s (based on secondary literature) for the forthcoming book project. There are, in fact, reasons to believe that my argument should be relevant then too, given that the prospect of Saddam using force to take advantage of Kurdish infighting was not a far-fetched possibility. This would work as an out of sample test of my argument, using for theory testing a different phase of the case I selected for theory development.

#### 4. Can the Theory Explain the Case?

In this section, I assess the fit of my theoretical argument to the case. Drawing from the previous section's overview of the case, the variation to be explained is:

- The absence of inter-rebel war in the first two years of the war, 1962-63;
- The outbreak of inter-rebel war between the Barzani faction and the Ahmed-Talabani faction in 1964 (heralding Barzani's hegemony, which would last until 1976);
- The inter-rebel war between the KDP and the PUK in 1978;
- The subsequent absence of inter-rebel war until 1983;
- The inter-rebel war between the PUK and the all the other rebel groups active in Kurdistan (forming the National Democratic Front) in 1983;
- The absence of large-scale violence between the PUK and the National Democratic Front in 1985-1988, after the PUK resumed its fight against Baghdad.

**Figure 3.2 Timeline of inter-rebel war in Iraqi Kurdistan**



The analysis focuses on the years of multi-party civil war (i.e., when there are multiple rebel groups, which may or may not fight against each other while they are battling the government), so the years 1966-1975 are excluded, as in this period the Ahmed-Talabani faction sided with the government and then ceased to exist as a separate organization.<sup>168</sup> I consider the Barzani and the Ahmed-Talabani factions as two separate rebel organizations in the years 1962-1964, in spite of the existence of a loose institutional link between them under the KDP's banner.<sup>169</sup> In fact, the two factions made independent strategic decisions about their fight against the government and had exclusive control of their respective armed forces and territorial bases.<sup>170</sup>

With this case study I cannot fully test the part of my theory about the relationship between coethnicity and inter-rebel war as all rebel groups are coethnics (i.e., Kurdish).<sup>171</sup> The

---

<sup>168</sup> My theory does not try to explain why some armed groups, after having switched to the government side, fight groups that remain in the rebel camp while others abstain from such acts. I consider this variation beyond the motivating puzzle of my research, as after the flip, the organization is no longer a rebel group by definition.

<sup>169</sup> Barzani received the honorary title of president of the KDP during his Soviet exile and maintained the position after his return to Iraq in 1958; Ibrahim Ahmed was the general-secretary of the KDP and the head of its politburo – most of whose members were loyalists of Ahmed and Talabani (McDowall 2004, pp. 302-6).

<sup>170</sup> The Ahmed-Talabani faction meets the criteria of autonomous decision-making about alignments and use of force and exclusive authority over its armed forces to be considered a distinct rebel group. The faction entered the anti-government military struggle (in which the Barzani faction was already engaged) in early 1962, after a few months of agonizing indecision (David Adamson, *The Kurdish War*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1964, p. 98; O'Ballance 1973, pp. 78-9; Jawad 1981, pp. 80-2; McDowall 2004, pp. 310-1; Gareth R. V. Stansfield, *Iraqi Kurdistan: Political Development and Emergent Democracy*, London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003, p. 70). Primary and secondary accounts consistently describe the two factions as having distinct forces under separate commands and operating in distinct parts of Iraqi Kurdistan (Barzani in the north and the politburo in the south). For example, Dr. Mahmoud Osman, Barzani's close collaborator, describes the two entities in the following terms: "They operated in separate areas, they had separate forces under their command: essentially two separate regions and two separate revolutions with only weak connections between the two" (author's interview). Among the secondary sources, see, for example, O'Ballance 1973, p. 87-8; Jawad 1981, pp. 80-5; Nawshirwan Mustafa 1997, pp. 65-6; Stansfield 2003, p. 61). In this phase of the war, the KDP is better thought of as an alliance between two rebel organizations rather than a single armed group.

case, however, does allow me to observe an implication of the coethnicity argument and thus potentially to falsify it: in the aftermath of inter-rebel war, rebel groups should easily manage to operate and recruit from areas previously under the control of their defeated rival.

### ***From inter-rebel cooperation to war (1962-1964)***

Window of opportunity logic explains the first episode of inter-rebel war in 1964 and the absence of large-scale Kurdish infighting in the previous years. In July 1964 the Barzani faction attacked and expelled from Iraq its much weaker rival – the Ahmed-Talabani faction – taking advantage of a lull in the fight against the government. The Barzani faction had been overwhelmingly stronger throughout the rebellion, but the threat posed by the government did not warrant a hegemonic bid until the spring of 1964. Before the February 1964 ceasefire, at different moments the rebels confronted major government offensives and an ominous military buildup in Kurdistan, or they faced a new government of untested determination and strength. By contrast, there is no indication of the constitutive elements of window of vulnerability (a mounting threat for a group or obvious trend in the balance of power), which could prompt a gamble for resurrection.

At the onset of the rebellion, Barzani's fighters numbered 5,000, while the Ahmed-Talabani faction had little in the way of a military organization. By the summer of 1962, the Kurdish ranks had expanded to 15,000 armed men, most of them under Barzani's control.<sup>172</sup> The stark imbalance of power in favor of Barzani clearly emerges from interviews with peshmerga commanders and rebel leaders. For example, Khursheed Shera – a fighter on Barzani's side from 1961 and later KDP military commander – after emphatically noting Barzani faction's military

---

<sup>171</sup> I selected this case for theory development, before formulating the coethnicity hypothesis.

<sup>172</sup> Adamson 1964, p. 91; O'Ballance 1973, p. 84-5; Jawad 1981, pp. 80-5. Sa'ad Jawad (1981, p. 84) explicitly speaks of the Ahmed-Talabani faction's "inferior fighting capacity."



superiority reported that in 1964 it consisted of 10,000 troops, while the Ahmed-Talabani faction had three units of 1,500 armed men each.<sup>173</sup>

After being squeezed in the mountains by government advances in 1961, the insurgents managed to gradually expand their operations to large swaths of Kurdistan in the spring and summer of 1962. However, throughout 1962 government troop strength in the region increased: Iraqi forces in Kurdistan doubled in size by the end of the year, from four to eight brigades.<sup>174</sup> Even if this buildup did not translate into battlefield trends favorable to the government, it is likely to have figured prominently in Barzani's calculations and to have induced him to caution.<sup>175</sup>

In February 1963, a coup brought to power the Baath party, whose resolve and ability to conduct effective military operations were untested. There were, in fact, signs that the new government may represent a more relentless foe than its predecessor for the Kurds. The Baath's ideology opposed major concessions to the Kurds, considering any potential cooperation with them only as a tactical arrangement to get rid of Qassem.<sup>176</sup> The Baath shared the widespread

---

<sup>173</sup> Author's interview, 10 November, 2012, Erbil, Iraq; at the time of the interview, Khursheed Shera was a KDP member of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Parliament. In an interview with the author Dr. Mahmoud Osman also pointed out the military superiority of the Barzani's faction. The secondary literature and interviewees tend to focus on troop numbers when discussing the balance of power between the two groups, with no indication that the Ahmed-Talabani had an edge in other dimensions of military power (battlefield experience, cohesion and weaponry). The only exception is Edgar O'Ballance (1973, p. 104), who claims that the Ahmed-Talabani fighters "were better disciplined, organized and controlled" but also reports a much larger numerical imbalance between the two factions than other sources (about 15,000 vs. 650 fighters), leaving in any case little doubt about the overall superiority of Barzani's forces.

<sup>174</sup> O'Ballance 1973, pp. 88-9.

<sup>175</sup> There were in fact indications that the troop buildup had concrete offensive aims: as Schmidt reports (1964, pp. 82-4), in April 1962 Barzani's forces managed to disrupt the preparations for a major government offensive due to start in mid-May.

<sup>176</sup> See, for example, Vanly 1970, pp. 159-60, for a discussion of the ideological position of the Arab nationalist forces (and the Baath party in particular) opposed to Qassem. Vanly also reports that in December 1962 (two months

dissatisfaction in the officer corps with Qassem's conduct of the war against the Kurds, seeing its lack of success as a consequence of the limits on the army's freedom of movement and constraints on ammunitions and other supplies imposed by the prime minister.<sup>177</sup> After the coup, the Iraqi military was vocal in arguing that Qassem "did not want to defeat" the Kurds but wanted to "keep the army away from Baghdad" and in expressing its belief that, provided it was granted enough weapons and troops, "the Kurdish rebellion would be eliminated in the space of a week."<sup>178</sup> Moreover, in 1963 Iraqi troops kept flowing north, so that by May 1963 three quarters of the army were deployed against the guerrillas.<sup>179</sup> Thus the months of negotiations between the Kurdish movement and the Baath following the coup (February-June) were probably not seen by Barzani as propitious for launching of a hegemonic bid.<sup>180</sup>

As war resumed in June 1963, the Baath government launched an offensive larger than the previous ones, making significant territorial headways in the course of the summer. However, in October a substantial number of troops were redeployed from Kurdistan to Baghdad to deal with political turmoil there, which enabled rebel territorial gains. Between the November 1963 coup and the February 1964 ceasefire, the new government was barely able to prevent further

---

before the coup), the KDP politburo issued a resolution concluding that Iraq's nationalist parties (including the Baath) had a "chauvinist attitude, against the Kurdish people, against its national demands, against our revolution."

<sup>177</sup> O'Ballance 1973, pp. 97-98; Chris Kutschera, *Le Mouvement National Kurd* (Paris: Frammarion, 1979), p. 226; Kenneth M. Pollack, *Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness, 1948-1991* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press), 2002, pp. 158-9; McDowall 2004, p. 313. In November 1962, a Lebanese newspaper revealed that a group of officers of the Iraqi general staff had presented a memorandum to Qassem criticizing his management of the war along the lines mentioned above (reported in Vanly 1970, pp. 158-9).

<sup>178</sup> Eric Rouleau, *Le Monde*, 12 March, 1963.

<sup>179</sup> Pollack 2002, p. 158.

<sup>180</sup> Jawad (1981, p. 146) points out that "[t]hroughout March and April both sides [the rebels and the government] began to reinforce their positions."

rebel advances, as Iraqi forces had been significantly weakened by coup-related infighting and post-coup purges as well as by the withdrawal of a supporting Syrian brigade.<sup>181</sup> The government would not be able to launch a serious offensive with an army in such weak conditions. The existence of a moment of opportunity for Barzani to liquidate his rivals was further signaled by Baghdad's statements and actions following the ceasefire: Iraqi President Abdul Salam Aref threatened force against elements opposed to the peace between him and Barzani – a thinly veiled reference to the Ahmed-Talabani faction – and shortly afterwards the government started providing weapons and money to Barzani.<sup>182</sup>

Important military figures on Barzani's side confirm that the Kurdish leader understood that the new government in Baghdad was weak and needed a break from the fight to reorganize in the aftermath of the coup. Khursheed Shera observes that “the Iraqi army was tired and needed a break, as it was busy killing Baathists. They needed a break to reorganize. They did not consider it [the February 1964 ceasefire] a final agreement...Mullah Mustafa [Barzani] understood Baghdad's position on this.”<sup>183</sup> Sa'id Kaka's account is consistent:

*Author:* Why did Mullah Mustafa Barzani want peace with the government in 1964?

*Sa'id Kaka:* People were really tired of war. You have to do what people demand and they demanded a break.<sup>184</sup> It was just a tactical pause.

---

<sup>181</sup> O'Ballance 1973, pp. 107-15. The Baathist Syrian government had contributed a 5,000 strong brigade (and airpower support) to the Iraqi offensive against the Kurds started in the summer of 1963.

<sup>182</sup> Jawad 1981, pp. 159 and 165; McDowall 2004, p. 316; author's interview with Dr. Mahmoud Osman.

<sup>183</sup> Author's interview, 10 November, 2012, Erbil, Iraq. Khursheed Shera was a peshmerga on Barzani's side from 1961 and later became a KDP's military commander; at the time of the interview, he was a KDP's member of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Parliament.

<sup>184</sup> The point that Barzani was deeply concerned by the fact that the Kurdish people were exhausted is reported by several observers (e.g., Kutschera 1979, Kindle location 5417-30; Nawshirwan Mustafa 1998, p. 74).

*Author:* Did Barzani fear that Baghdad would take advantage of the conflict with the Ahmed-Talabani faction?

*Sa'id Kaka:* Baghdad did not want to fight because it was hurting too and so there was no fear of that sort for Mullah Mustafa. Baghdad needed a break too from fighting.<sup>185</sup>

Dr. Mahmoud Osman, Barzani's close collaborator, offers important insight into the calculus of the Kurdish leader, clearly suggesting that he perceived the existence of a moment of opportunity to get rid of a potential threat after the 1964 ceasefire:

“Mullah Mustafa [Barzani] had intended to attack the politburo since 1963, but could not do that then because the Kurds were engaged in heavy fighting against the Baath. Mullah Mustafa and the politburo [the Ahmed-Talabani faction] had been engaged in a power struggle. Barzani wanted to be in control of the party; the politburo wanted to do the same and use Mullah Mustafa as a symbol to attract popular support for its cause... Both sides were concerned about the other's plan to take control of the movement. There was a lot of mistrust on both sides<sup>186</sup>... Mullah Mustafa signed the February [ceasefire]

---

<sup>185</sup> Author's interview, 10 November, 2012, Erbil, Iraq. Sa'id Kaka was a military commander on Barzani's side at the time of the events discussed; he subsequently was a military commander in the PUK (1975-1979) and the Socialist Party (from 1979). At the time of the interview, he was a KDP member of the KRG Parliament. Importantly, the Ahmed-Talabani faction shared this assessment of the government's political and military weakness (O'Ballance 1973, p. 114 and p. 119; Kutschera 1979, Kindle location 5435-42).

<sup>186</sup> Tensions and distrust between Barzani and Ahmed had existed since before the onset of the war against Baghdad (Jawad 1981, pp. 160-3). Several observers report that since 1962 Barzani expressed to visitors contempt and distrust towards the Ahmed-Talabani faction; on his part, Ahmed labeled Barzani as repressive, tribal and “a Kurdish de Gaulle” (Adamson 1964, *passim*; Vanly 1970, p. 221; Jawad 1981, p. 184). Reportedly, in 1963 Barzani accused the Ahmed-Talabani faction of collusion with the government for not doing anything to ease the pressure on his forces during an earlier offensive by Qassem (Jawad 1981, p. 163). Barzani is also said to have ominously hinted in 1963 that he “might have to bring to reason the faction of the politburo [the Ahmed-Talabani faction]” (Vanly 1970, p. 221).

agreement with the clear objective of getting rid of the politburo. He took advantage of a lull in the fight with the government.”<sup>187</sup>

After the expulsion of the Ahmed-Talabani faction, Barzani consolidated his control of the Kurdish region and the rebel movement, without encountering any resistance in areas previously under his rivals’ control.<sup>188</sup>

In sum, the available evidence strongly supports the interpretation of the 1964 inter-rebel war as a hegemonic bid by Barzani. The key elements of window of opportunity logic were present in the spring of 1964, but not before. First, all sources agree that the military balance was clearly in favor of Barzani’s faction throughout the war. Second, in 1964 Barzani’s threat environment vis-à-vis the government was markedly more favorable than in the past, as the Iraq armed forces were clearly weakened by the coup and the withdrawal of the supporting Syrian unit. As military commanders on Barzani’s side consistently point out in interviews, the Kurdish leader understood that the government needed a break from the fight and thus would not be able

---

<sup>187</sup> Author’s interview. Barzani did not write his memoirs and refused to have his oral recollection of past events to be taped (Jonathan Randal, *Kurdistan: After Such Knowledge, What Forgiveness?*, London: Bloomsbury, 1998, p. 177). It is thus necessary to rely on accounts of Barzani’s decision-making provided by individuals in his inner circle. Dr. Osman is such an individual as he was a member of the KDP leadership since 1964 and is often referred to in the literature as Barzani’s right hand and de facto foreign minister. After 1975 Dr. Osman vehemently criticized Barzani for his mismanagement of the struggle in its last phases. However, this does not necessarily undermine the credibility of his account of the 1964 events. Dr. Osman would not have an interest in portraying in a negative light Barzani in this episode because he himself was indirectly implicated as a new member of the KDP’s leadership in the aftermath of the expulsion from Iraq of the Ahmed-Talabani faction. Moreover, Dr. Osman has long been an independent figure in Iraqi Kurdistan’s political landscape and is widely respected as a non-partisan, balanced observer. Several authors offer a consistent reading of the events of 1964 (e.g., Kutschera 1979, Kindle location 5431-5; Jawad 1981, pp. 153-76; John Bulloch and Harvey Morris, *No Friends But the Mountains: The Tragic History of the Kurds*, London: Viking, 1992, p. 127).

<sup>188</sup> O’Ballance 1973, p. 121; Kutschera 1979, pp. 250-3; author’s interview with Khursheed Shera. For a detailed description of Barzani’s unchallenged control of the Kurdish movement and the “liberated areas” after the clash, see Vanly 1970, pp. 238-252. The Ahmed-Talabani faction would be able to operate in areas around Sulaimania, after its 1966 flip, with military back-up from government forces (author’s interview with Salar Aziz, member of the Ahmed-Talabani faction and high ranking PUK’s member since the organization’s early days; he was a senior figure of Gorran party at the time of the interview, 10-11 December, 2012, Sulaimania, Iraq).

to take advantage of Kurdish infighting. Moreover, a close collaborator of Barzani explicitly states that the Kurdish leader saw the lull in the fight against the government as an opportunity to get rid of a threatening rival for the leadership of the Kurdish movement. Finally, consistent with the expectation that coethnic rebel resources are relatively easily cumulable, Barzani was able to extend its authority to areas formerly under his rivals' control without facing any resistance from the local population.

### ***Inter-rebel war in 1978***

Window of vulnerability logic explains the second episode of inter-rebel war in Iraqi Kurdistan. Relations between the PUK and the KDP were tense from the beginning.<sup>189</sup> Talabani needed to mobilize a population that was deeply disillusioned in the aftermath of the 1975 debacle. The PUK's approach to this difficult task was to draw a sharp distinction between the new organization and the "feudalist, tribalist and rightist" leadership of the previous rebellion, which it accused of being responsible for the defeat.<sup>190</sup> The KDP responded with propaganda attacks of its own.<sup>191</sup> Both organizations were initially extremely weak, with a few hundred poorly armed men facing the formidable Iraqi military machinery.<sup>192</sup> The KDP concentrated its early activities in Badinan, while the PUK was most active in the Sorani areas, the Ahmed-Talabani faction's

---

<sup>189</sup> Nawshirwan Mustafa 1997, pp. 71 and 93-6.

<sup>190</sup> PUK's Declaration of Formation, issued on 1 June, 1975, Damascus, Syria (provided to the author by Faridoun Abd-Al Qader, PUK's founding member; document translated for the author from Kurdish Sorani by Dr. Kamal Soleimani); McDowall 2004, p. 343.

<sup>191</sup> At least according to PUK sources (Nawshirwan Mustafa 1997, p. 95).

<sup>192</sup> Karadaghi 1993, pp. 219-20, Kutschera 1997, p. 40. Buoyed by rapidly expanding oil revenues, Baghdad launched a major buildup of its armed forces in the aftermath of the Algiers agreement (Bengio 2012, pp. 153-5).

erstwhile stronghold.<sup>193</sup> Despite their profound reciprocal distrust, we should not expect either organization to embark on a hegemonic bid, given the rough balance of power (or better, weakness) just noted. Moreover, in particular after the government had launched a determined counterinsurgency campaign in the spring of 1977, the rebel groups were under significant military pressure from the Iraqi armed forces, making large-scale inter-rebel violence additionally unappealing.<sup>194</sup>

The 1978 clash can, however, be explained as the unintended result of a PUK's "gamble for resurrection" – a risky attempt to deal with the window of vulnerability it was facing. The PUK tried to establish a supply route through Badinan to Syria to obtain badly needed weapons and ammunition, but the KDP perceived the PUK's move as an encroachment on its stronghold and feared the shift in the balance of power that would ensue. It thus resorted to force to block the PUK's initiative.

The PUK had faced a window of vulnerability since the beginning of its guerrilla campaign. Essential supplies (ranging from sleeping equipment to weapons and ammunition) had

---

<sup>193</sup> The PUK was an umbrella organization of three groups: Komala (a Marxist-Leninist, Kurdish nationalist organization that had operated clandestinely in Sorani areas since 1970), the Social Democratic Movement (led by some former prominent KDP members, in particular Ali Askari) and the General Line (a group of influential Kurdish personalities that returned from abroad and did not have a large organization on the ground in Kurdistan). Positions in the PUK's leadership organs and local branches were allocated so as to ensure the representation of each of its components (Christiane More, *Les Kurdes Auhjourd'hui: Mouvement National and Partis Politiques*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 1984, pp. 120-2; Nawshirwan Mustafa 1997, pp. 171-5; Stansfield 2003, pp. 79-84). It is nonetheless appropriate to speak of the PUK as a single rebel organization because it had a unified chain of command under Jalal Talabani's leadership; none of the three components had authority over military issues, political relations with other groups and the government, and finances nor did they have their own distinct peshmerga forces (Nawshirwan Mustafa 1997, p. 336).

<sup>194</sup> Nawshirwan Mustafa 1997, pp. 130, 144-7 and 157. In the summer of 1977, Nawshirwan Mustafa, PUK's unofficial deputy commander, briefed Talabani on the dire conditions of the organization's forces in the field, describing the intense pressure brought on them by the government offensive, which had caused a large number of defections from the insurgent ranks (Nawshirwan Mustafa 1997, p. 166; see also Kutschera 1997, p. 40, for a description of the massive forces deployed by Baghdad in Kurdistan in the summer of 1977). The government kept up the pressure in 1978 (Nawshirwan Mustafa 1997, pp. 211-6).

to come from Syria, the group's main external supporter.<sup>195</sup> However, Iraq's border with Syria was under tight government control: the only way to Syria was through Badinan and then southern Turkey, where the KDP and allied tribes held significant sway.<sup>196</sup> In 1976-1977, two small PUK's contingents operating in areas of Badinan straddling the border with Turkey were harassed and eventually wiped out by either government forces and militias or local tribes and KDP-affiliates.<sup>197</sup> The available information on these attacks and the identity of their perpetrators is patchy.<sup>198</sup> It is, however, clear that these episodes do not amount to large-scale fighting between the KDP and the PUK (i.e., inter-rebel war), as they are described as skirmishes, typically taking the form of ambushes on small PUK's units on the move. Even if these attacks (as it is plausible) were conducted by the KDP as part of the group's plan to deny the PUK access to Badinan and Syria (rather than at the initiative of local commanders), they would be better conceptualized as the kind of limited violence that rebel groups often use to gain a marginal advantage over their rivals or prevent an unfavorable development without the steep costs and risks of all-out war (see my discussion of "salami tactics" in Chapter 2).<sup>199</sup>

---

<sup>195</sup> Libya was also providing support to the PUK but for geographical reasons its aid would need to go through Syria to reach Kurdistan. Shortage of weapons in Kurdistan was especially acute because, after the end of the rebellion in 1975, the government had launched a successful weapon buyback program, promising financial rewards for turning in guns and threatening capital punishment for illegal possession; the government collected over 150,000 guns (Nawshirwan Mustafa 1997, p. 96).

<sup>196</sup> Nawshirwan Mustafa 1997, pp. 95-6; Kutschera 1997, p. 42; Farid Asasard 2010, pp. 125-6. As Nawshirwan Mustafa (1997, p. 125) puts it in his memoirs, "Badinan ... was the only way to get to the outside world, the only gateway for weapons and ammunition and so we could not give up on it."

<sup>197</sup> Nawshirwan Mustafa 1997, pp. 121-3 and 178-9.

<sup>198</sup> Adel Murad (PUK founding member and senior figure at the time of the interview), for example, strongly suspects that the attacks were part of an overarching KDP's plan to nip in the bud the PUK, but he admits not to have seen any direct evidence of such a plan. Moreover, as Chris Kutschera (1997, p. 39) notices, until 1979 the KDP political leadership (mostly based outside of Iraq) was not fully in control of the military commanders on the ground; it is thus possible that the attacks occurred without leadership's orders or authorization.



The PUK tried several times to find some form of understanding with the KDP that would allow it to operate in Badinan, explaining that its only enemy was the government and it did not want to have problems with the KDP.<sup>200</sup> At a meeting in London between the two groups' leaderships, the KDP committed to investigate the events surrounding the disappearance of a PUK's contingent in Badinan in the summer of 1976 (allegedly attacked by KDP affiliates).<sup>201</sup> Eventually in March 1977, with Syrian prodding, the PUK and the KDP agreed to facilitate each other's operations in their respective strongholds and establish mechanisms to monitor and ensure the equal distribution of weapons among the groups.<sup>202</sup> However, shortly afterwards the KDP reneged on the agreement, accusing the PUK of having brought clandestinely weapons to Kurdistan. The KDP then refused to facilitate PUK's movements from and to Syria through Badinan and another PUK contingent transporting weapons from Syria into Kurdistan was allegedly ambushed by KDP affiliates.<sup>203</sup>

While access to Syria was essential for the PUK to wage its war against the state, it would inevitably affect the balance of power between the two rebel organizations, generating a classic commitment problem.<sup>204</sup> The KDP leadership perceived the PUK as aggressive and

---

<sup>199</sup> Nawshirwan Mustafa (1997, pp. 195-6 and 218-9) reports that there were also skirmishes between PUK and the KDP forces in Sorani areas; the PUK either disarmed the local KDP forces, absorbed them in the organization or pushed them out of the region.

<sup>200</sup> Talabani sent several letters to this effect to KDP leaders (Nawshirwan Mustafa 1997, p. 96).

<sup>201</sup> Nawshirwan Mustafa 1997, pp. 121-3 and 129.

<sup>202</sup> Nawshirwan Mustafa 1997, pp. 130-1 and 135.

<sup>203</sup> Nawshirwan Mustafa 1997, pp. 158-9, 161-2 and 178; author's interview with Adel Murad; author's interview with Omar Said Ali (high-ranking PUK member at the time of the events; in the leadership of Gorran party at the time of the interview), 10-11 December, 2012, Sulaimania, Iraq.

would thus see with apprehension an expansion of PUK's firepower, as the newly acquired weapons could be used against the KDP.<sup>205</sup> Even if one discounts as self-serving the KDP's accusation that the PUK harbored aggressive intentions, the mere existence of a deep conflict of interest between the two (both preferred to have more influence in the Kurdish struggle against the state) implied a commitment problem: the PUK could not credibly commit before establishing a supply route to Syria not to throw its weight around afterwards; thus the KDP may have preferred to use force to forestall the unfavorable shift in the balance of power to living with its consequences (i.e., acquiescing to a subordinate position in the rebel camp or fighting from a position of weakness). Moreover, even if the KDP leadership were certain (which most likely was not) that the PUK did not have aggressive or hegemonic intentions at that time, it could not rule out that its rival's appetite would grow with its power or that new, more ambitious leaders would emerge in the future.<sup>206</sup>

Much debate took place within the PUK leadership following the breakdown of the 1977 agreement with the KDP, with options being discussed ranging from violent retaliation to complete abandonment of Badinan. However, in spite of many meetings and resolutions, no clear

---

<sup>204</sup> Robert Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30 (2), 1978: 167-214; James D. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization* 49 (3), 1995: 379-414.

<sup>205</sup> Khursheed Shera, for example, argues that "Talabani [by creating the PUK] wanted somehow to get back at Mullah Mustafa [Barzani]" and that the primary conclusion of one of PUK's first meetings was that the KDP should be considered an enemy (author's interview). Muhsin Dizai (close advisor to Mullah Mustafa Barzani and senior KDP member at the time of the interview) claims that the tensions between the two organizations were due to the fact that the PUK wanted to control Badinan (author's interview, 12 November 2012, Erbil, Iraq). Even if Talabani repeatedly tried to cooperate with the KDP, the PUK's Declaration of Formation (and subsequent communiqués) did lend itself to an aggressive interpretation: the PUK accused the KDP leadership of having colluded with imperialist forces hostile to the Kurdish people and having shamefully abandoned the battlefield in 1975; the PUK also proclaimed its duty to lead the new revolution.

<sup>206</sup> Omar Said Ali (high-ranking PUK member in its early days) indirectly suggests that a change in the group's intentions over time was not a far-fetched possibility, as he notes that within the PUK in those early years two views confronted each other – one was in favor of cooperation with the KDP against the common enemy (Baghdad), while the other one advocated fighting against Kurdish conservative forces (the KDP) (author's interview).

decision was made about the PUK's next move and how to address the group's acute logistical needs.<sup>207</sup> According to PUK's unofficial deputy leader at that time, Nawshirwan Mustafa, Baghdad's decision to resume its depopulation campaign of the Kurdish border areas eventually forced the PUK's hand. The group's leadership decided to oppose the government initiative (scheduled to start in July 1978) by arming the people in the affected areas, which in turn required finding a way to get guns from Syria.<sup>208</sup> Having assessed the KDP's strength in border areas between Iraq and Turkey, its influence among the local tribes, and the deployments of Iraqi, Iranian and Turkish forces along the route, the PUK decided to send an expeditionary force of about 1,000 men (half of them unarmed) to pick up a major cache of arms coming from Syria and establish a base in Bradost, an area of Badinan where the Iraqi, Turkish and Iranian borders meet.<sup>209</sup> In the hope of avoiding a military confrontation, Talabani sent letters to the KDP's leadership explaining that the expedition was not against the KDP and its sole purpose was transporting weapons from Syria to fight the government more effectively.<sup>210</sup> However, after having been harassed by Iraqi and Iranian forces en route, the PUK's contingent was ambushed by a large KDP force and affiliated tribes on Turkish soil. Hundreds of PUK's members were killed (including many leaders) and captured or surrendered to the government, while the remaining forces disorderly retreated to Sorani areas.<sup>211</sup> It would take years for the PUK to fully

---

<sup>207</sup> Nawshirwan Mustafa 1997, pp. 168-70 and 179.

<sup>208</sup> Nawshirwan Mustafa 1997, pp. 256 and 264-5.

<sup>209</sup> Nawshirwan Mustafa 1997, pp. 266-9; Farid Asasard 2010, pp. 131-2.

<sup>210</sup> More 1984, p. 124; Nawshirwan Mustafa 1997, pp. 270-1

<sup>211</sup> McDowall 2004, pp. 344-5; Nawshirwan Mustafa 1997, pp. 273-7 and 278-89.

recover from the blow and the group would not attempt again to establish a supply route to Syria.<sup>212</sup>

All PUK-related subjects I interviewed agree that the KDP was not the expedition's target and that the participation of large number of armed men was just a precaution in case the PUK came under attack (by the KDP, Iraq or its neighbors): the PUK had a contingency plan to respond to an attack by the KDP, but it preferred not to fight.<sup>213</sup> However, the most empathic PUK-related interviewees readily acknowledge that the KDP would inevitably perceive the PUK's move as threatening, because the growth of PUK's power following the establishment of the supply route could lead to further encroachments in Badinan.<sup>214</sup>

In sum, the available evidence supports the interpretation that the 1978 clash occurred as an unwanted result of the PUK gambling for resurrection to get access to Syrian support. The key elements of window of vulnerability logic are present. The PUK was badly in need of supplies, weapons and ammunition, but these could only be obtained from Syria, which could

---

<sup>212</sup> Nawshirwan Mustafa (1997, p 321) and Omar Said Ali (author's interview) make this observation.

<sup>213</sup> Author's interview with Mulazin Omar (PUK military commander from its early days; no longer active in politics at the time of the interview), 15 November, 2012, Sulaimania, Iraq; author's interview with Shores Hadji; author's interview with Mohammad Tofiq; author's interview with Salar Aziz; author's interview with Omar Said Ali; author's interview with Farid Asasard; author's interview with Mala Baxtiar; author's interview with Fouad Yassin (KDP peshmerga until 1975 and then PUK foot soldier in the years 1976-1978; he was not involved in politics at the time of the interview, 13 November, 2012, Sulaimania Iraq). This is not to say that the PUK's leadership did not optimistically miscalculate the risks involved in the expedition and that it could have been deterred had it assessed the situation more accurately. In fact, in hindsight, Nawshirwan Mustafa points out that the PUK made a number of political and military miscalculations in organizing and conducting the expedition (1997, p. 277). It is important to note that these PUK-related subjects do not have necessarily the same incentive structure: as several of them abandoned the PUK and publicly or privately criticized it, their consistent account of the group's preference for avoiding military confrontation gains credibility.

<sup>214</sup> Author's interview with Shores Hadji; author's interview with Omar Said Ali. According to the KDP's narrative of the event, the PUK had planned to destroy the KDP's headquarters on its way to Syria (Van Bruinessen 1986, p. 24; author's interview with Mala Mohamed, KDP's member since before the beginning of the war in 1961 and high ranking KDP member at the time of the events and of the interview, 20 December, 2012, Salahadin, Iraq). Some renowned scholars implicitly endorse the KDP's interpretation of the event, but they do not provide any supporting evidence (Stansfield 2003, pp. 87-9; McDowall 2004, pp. 344-5).

only be reached by crossing KDP-dominated areas. As initial, less provocative attempts at establishing a supply route to Syria failed in 1976 and 1977, in 1978 the PUK's leadership reluctantly embarked on a major expedition to transport a large cache of weapons back to Kurdistan, knowing that there was a risk of a military clash with the KDP. With no guarantee of benign PUK's intentions in the present and in the future, the KDP ambushed the PUK's contingent and inflicted a major blow to its rival.

### ***Inter-rebel war in 1983***

The fight between the PUK and the other major groups operating in Kurdistan in 1983 can also be understood through the lenses of window of vulnerability, as the PUK resorted to force in a desperate attempt to break its encirclement by the rival rebel alliance and Iran.

The negative consequences of the 1978 clash for the PUK were not limited to the loss of a large percentage of its fighters.<sup>215</sup> The military debacle exacerbated preexisting tensions between factions within the organization. The leaders of the Social Democratic Movement, which had just lost two key figures and a great deal of foot soldiers, criticized Talabani's leadership and eventually decided to breakaway in the spring of 1979, forming a new organization – the Socialist Party.<sup>216</sup> The constellation of rebel groups active in Kurdistan

---

<sup>215</sup> The estimates of the PUK's manpower losses range quite widely, from around 25 percent (Van Bruinessen 1986, p. 24; Kutschera 1997, p. 42) to almost 60 percent (Salar Aziz, author's interview; Stansfield 2003, p. 88) (the percentages are calculated based on a total figure of 1,200 peshmergas, provided by Fared Asaserd, author's interview); Nawshirwan Mustafa (1997, p. 289) reports that "the PUK lost most of its forces."

<sup>216</sup> Kutschera 1997, pp. 42-3; Van Bruinessen 1986, pp. 23-6. The PUK's breakaway faction merged with Dr. Mahmoud Osman's small group to form the Socialist Party. After the KDP's debacle in 1975, Dr. Osman openly criticized Barzani and created a small organization, the "KDP-Preparatory committee", later renamed the "United Socialist Party of Kurdistan." Several observers link the PUK's 1978 defeat to its subsequent fragmentation (Nawshirwan Mustafa 1997, p. 336; Van Bruinessen 1986, p. 25). For arguments and some evidence that battlefield losses may lead to organizational fragmentation, see Michael Woldemariam, "Battlefield Outcomes and Rebel Cohesion: Lessons From the Eritrean," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 2015 (forthcoming); and Fotini Christia, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

became even more complex in late 1979, when the Communist Party established a military presence in the Sorani areas after having been expelled by the Baath from the ruling National Patriotic Front.<sup>217</sup> According to Nawshirwan Mustafa, Talabani thought that allying with the Communist Party would guarantee Soviet backing and thus provided support to the fledging armed group.<sup>218</sup>

We should not expect any group to launch a hegemonic bid in the years 1978-1983, as none of the organizations had a marked military advantage vis-à-vis the others, even if, starting from late 1980, the government threat receded significantly with the beginning and escalation of the Iran-Iraq war.<sup>219</sup> There are no precise figures on the number of troops of the different organizations, but it seems that the PUK was only marginally larger than the Socialist Party in 1979 in terms of number of fighters.<sup>220</sup> Because of this rough balance of power, my argument would predict the PUK and the Socialist Party to abstain from fighting each other. The PUK and the KDP were also roughly equal in strength and were increasingly entrenched in their respective strongholds in Sorani areas and Badinan.<sup>221</sup> Thus we would not expect them to fight each other. Even if the PUK may have had the strength to rapidly wipe out the Communist Party (which is

---

<sup>217</sup> More 1984, p. 142; Kutschera 1997, pp. 45-7.

<sup>218</sup> Nawshirwan Mustafa, *Fingers that Break Each Other: Political Events in Kurdistan from 1979 to 1983* (Iraqi Kurdistan, 1998), pp. 28-31 (translated from Kurdish Sorani for the author by Dr. Kamal Soleimani).

<sup>219</sup> Both Nawshirwan Mustafa (1998, p. 182) and Shores Hadji (author's interview) stress the decreased threat posed by Baghdad as the war with Iran started.

<sup>220</sup> Author's interview with Adnan Mufti (high-ranking member of the Socialist Party at the time of the events; member of the PUK's politburo at the time of the interview), 18 December 2012, Erbil, Iraq. Van Bruinessen (1986, p. 27) estimates that in 1981 the PUK and the Socialist Party could muster, respectively 3,000 and 2,000 fighters.

<sup>221</sup> Van Bruinessen (1986, p. 27) reports that in 1981 the KDP and the PUK had, respectively, 2,000 and 3,000 peshmergas. The typical answer to my question about the KDP's and PUK's relative strength in this period offered by PUK's subjects was that each group was strong in its respective stronghold, with the PUK operating in a larger area (author's interviews with Adel Murad, Mulazin Omar and Shores Hadji).

far from certain in the aftermath of the 1978 clash with the KDP), the geopolitical calculations mentioned above and the existence of the other two comparably strong groups militated against such a course of action.<sup>222</sup>

However, developments in the Kurdish camp and the worsening of relations between the PUK and Iran would conspire to bring about large-scale inter-rebel violence. The PUK, the Socialist Party and the Communist Party formed a common front (the Patriotic National Democratic Front), from which the PUK purposefully excluded the KDP. But, two weeks later, the Socialist Party and the Communist Party established an analogous alliance (the National Democratic Front) with the KDP, thus nullifying the previous agreement and unleashing a series of accusations and recriminations between the PUK and its former allies.<sup>223</sup> Several factors other than mere hostility towards the PUK likely underlay the Socialist and Communist parties' volte-faces.<sup>224</sup> The PUK, however, could not help but perceive a worsening of its threat environment,

---

<sup>222</sup> Based on the definition provided in Chapter 2, the Communist Party should be considered a Kurdish rebel group from the beginning of its guerrilla activities in 1980 or 1981. In fact, the Communist Party had openly supported the Kurdish cause since the 1950s (in addition to its broader program of radical political and economic change for Iraq as a whole) and its fighters (reaching a peak of 2,000 in 1981) were almost exclusively Kurds (with Kurds well represented in the leadership too) (Van Bruinessen 1986, pp. 26-7; Mehrdad R. Izady, *The Kurds: A Concise Handbook*, Washington: Taylor & Francis, 1992, p. 215; Tareq Y. Ismael, *The Rise and Fall of the Communist Party of Iraq*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. 192 and 289-91).

<sup>223</sup> Pasok was also a member of the National Democratic Front. I do not include the organization in the analysis because of its low number of supporters and armed elements and the consequent inconsequential role that it played in the case (More 1984, p. 136; Kutschera 1997, p. 318, note 27; Nawshirwan Mustafa 1997, pp. 221-222; several sources do not even mention the organization, e.g., Van Bruinessen 1986).

<sup>224</sup> The Communist and Socialist Parties' decisions to ally with the KDP were likely overdetermined. Adnan Mufti (high-ranking Socialist Party's member at that time of the events) suggests that the Socialist Party's desire to establish warmer relations with Iran, which was allied with the KDP, played a role in Party's decision to ally with the latter (author's interview). Adnan Mufti also adds that the fact that the Socialist and Communist Parties operated in Sorani areas, and thus were inevitably involved in a power struggle for control of those areas with the PUK, influenced their decision. The fact that the Socialist Party signed agreements with both the PUK and the KDP in the span of few weeks was probably due to competition in the socialist leadership, in particular between Dr. Mahmoud Osman and Rasul Mamand (Nawshirwan Mustafa 1998, pp. 176-8); Dr. Mahmoud Osman, who signed the agreement with the PUK, considers the subsequent signing of the agreement with the KDP a mistake by the Socialist leadership, but he claims not to know what the rationale for that decision was (author's interview). According to

as it now faced an alliance led by its arch-rival (the KDP) with superior aggregate military power – an inter-rebel security dilemma was at play.<sup>225</sup>

Relations between the PUK and the National Democratic Front deteriorated in the following two years, as they got involved in a spiral of accidents and skirmishes.<sup>226</sup> Of particular concern for the PUK was the fact that the Socialists and the Communists appeared to be acting as a sort of Trojan horse for KDP's penetration of the Sorani region, by inviting KDP's peshmergas to their areas of operations; these troop movements may have been conducted to more effectively fight the government forces (as the Front's members claimed), but inevitably the PUK felt threatened.<sup>227</sup> At the same time, the Socialist and Communist parties resisted proposals by the PUK to establish closer ties between the three organizations, voicing fears that this would be the first step for the PUK to absorb them, which the PUK considered disingenuous.<sup>228</sup> In February 1983, Syria and Libya managed to broker an agreement between all of Iraqi opposition forces (including the PUK and the Front's parties) to coordinate their struggle, but it broke down a few days later.<sup>229</sup>

---

Kutschera (1997, p. 52), the Communist Party temporarily agreed to form a front with the PUK only because of Syrian pressure.

<sup>225</sup> The Front overall had twice as many fighters as the PUK in 1981 (Van Bruinessen 1986, p. 27).

<sup>226</sup> Kutschera 1997, p. 56. As Adnan Mufti notes about the skirmishes between the PUK and the other parties operating in Sorani areas, "often the fighting was not preplanned; there were disputes in villages, sometimes about a girl, sometimes a local commander would try to show he was especially tough" (author's interview). Consistently, Nawshirwan Mustafa (1998, pp. 188-92 and 207-20) describes a pattern of clashes sparked by local and personal disputes, rather than an all-out fight directed by the organizations' leaderships.

<sup>227</sup> Nawshirwan Mustafa 1998, p. 222; author's interviews with Shores Hadji, Omar Said Ali and Mala Baxtiar. Secondary sources make similar observations (e.g., Van Bruinessen 1986, pp. 25-6).

<sup>228</sup> Nawshirwan Mustafa 1998, pp. 252-6.



In parallel to the escalation of tensions in the rebel camp, PUK-Iranian relations took a turn for the worse. The PUK's relationship with Tehran had never been as smooth as the KDP's, but it deteriorated significantly when Ayatollah Khomeini ousted Abdulhassan Banisadr, revolutionary Iran's moderate, secular President.<sup>230</sup> According to Nawshirwan Mustafa, until then the PUK had managed the difficult balancing act of getting some support from Iran while continuing its cooperation with the Iranian Kurdish rebel groups, in particular, the Iranian KDP (KDPI henceforth). However, after Khomeini's consolidation of power, Teheran became inflexible in demanding that the PUK help it fight the KDPI. As the PUK did not budge, Iran severed relations.<sup>231</sup>

The threat posed by Iran to the PUK significantly increased in the course of 1982. Having contained Baghdad's offensive (1980-1982), in the summer Tehran launched its own offensive against the Iraqi forces on the southern front while striving to wrestle control of Iran's Kurdish north from the KDPI, which was supported by Baghdad.<sup>232</sup> The PUK sent 2,000 fighters in a desperate attempt to prop up its ethnic brethren's defenses against the Iranian onslaught, but this only served to buy some time for the KDPI's withdrawal into Iraq.<sup>233</sup> In March 1983, Iran

---

<sup>229</sup> Kutschera 1997, pp. 56-8; Nawshirwan Mustafa 1998, p. 279; McDowall 2004, p. 347.

<sup>230</sup> Author's interview with Faridoun Abd-Al Qader (senior PUK's member involved in diplomatic contacts with both Iran and Iraq); author's interview with Farid Asaserd.

<sup>231</sup> Nawshirwan Mustafa 1998, pp. 204-5.

<sup>232</sup> Cordesman and Wagner 1990, pp. 153-65,

<sup>233</sup> Kutschera 1997, p. 60; Nawshirwan Mustafa 1998, p. 264.

launched another operation, clearing residual KDPI forces from its territory.<sup>234</sup> An Iran emboldened by its recent successes against the Iraqi armed forces and further antagonized by PUK's involvement in its fight against the KDPI was now just across the border: PUK's hostile encirclement was complete.

In this context, after a new series of skirmishes with the Communist and Socialist forces following the breakdown of the February 1983 agreement, at the beginning of May the PUK launched a major attack against the two groups' headquarters. The operation inflicted substantial losses to the National Democratic Front's units and forced them to flee to Badinan and mountainous areas on the border with Iran.<sup>235</sup>

Nawshirwan Mustafa claims that the PUK's attack was preemptive:

“In February 1983, the KDP's forces, with the help of Iran, came close to Nauseng [where the PUK's headquarters were located], occupied the high ground and threatened to occupy the region... All the indications [in late April] were telling us that the National Democratic Front's forces were about to launch an attack... We had no choice but to fight for our life.”<sup>236</sup>

We should, of course, be wary of Nawshirwan Mustafa's claims, given his incentive to present the PUK's actions in a positive light. However, the basic features of the PUK's strategic situation in the spring of 1983 are hardly disputable: the PUK had bad relations with all the other

---

<sup>234</sup> Cordesman and Wagner 1990, p. 166.

<sup>235</sup> Van Bruinessen 1986, p. 26; Ismael 2008, pp. 201-2.

<sup>236</sup> Nawshirwan Mustafa 1998, pp. 280 and 289-90.

armed groups active in Iraqi Kurdistan; its only ally (the KDPI) had been defeated by Tehran; and a hostile Iran, allied with the KDP, appeared to be bent on invading Iraqi Kurdistan.<sup>237</sup> Thus even if we dismiss Nawshirwan Mustafa's preemptive logic as self-serving, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the PUK's security situation had dramatically deteriorated compared to the previous years and reached an especially critical level in the spring of 1983 – the kind of mounting threat that window theory suggests would prompt a gamble for resurrection.

Nawshirwan Mustafa claims that the people in areas of operations of the Socialist and Communist parties greeted the PUK's forces as liberators after the expulsion of the other groups. This is consistent with my theory's expectation about the cumulativeness of resources held by coethnic rivals.<sup>238</sup> However, I could neither corroborate this statement with other sources, which therefore should not be given undue weight.

To summarize, in spite of the absence of incontrovertible evidence of PUK's decision-making, the available information is consistent with an explanation of the 1983 inter-rebel clash as a gamble for resurrection driven by window of vulnerability logic. Key implications of the argument can be observed: as the PUK's threat environment deteriorated and non-violent attempts at establishing better relations with other rebel groups failed, the PUK resorted to a

---

<sup>237</sup> As Nawshirwan Mustafa (1998, p. 267) implies in his memoirs, the PUK's leadership was aware that supporting the KDPI in its fight against Iran would do little to endear itself to Tehran: "The PUK's stance was more an emotional reaction than a strategic calculation. KDPI was defeated and pushed out of Iran... The PUK's help could not have sufficed to defend the KDPI but it would anger Iran." We should be careful not to rely unduly on hindsight in making sense of PUK's calculus: the two Iranian offensives in areas of PUK's operations in 1983 (aimed at both weakening the Iraqi forces and finishing off the KDPI) occurred in the summer and fall, i.e., just after this episode of inter-rebel war (Cordesman and Wagner 1990, pp. 166-7 and 175-8; Bulloch and Morris 1992, p. 152; Hiltermann 2007, p. 29-32; Ibrahim Al-Marashi and Sammy Salama, *Iraq's Armed Forces: An Analytical History*, New York: Routledge, 2008, p. 142). However, the PUK likely saw with concern the presence of Iranian forces across the border, in a context in which Iran was openly hostile towards the group and had launched several cross-border offensives further south against Iraqi forces.

<sup>238</sup> Nawshirwan Mustafa 1998, p. 296.

risky gamble to improve its situation, by expelling from the Sorani areas the Communists and the Socialists.

### ***The absence of inter-rebel war in 1985-1988***

The lack of windows of opportunity and vulnerability goes a long way in explaining the absence of inter-rebel war in the years 1985-1988. With the attack on the Communists and Socialists, the PUK successfully reduced the threat posed by those groups, but its overall threat environment did not radically improve. In the summer and fall of 1983, Iran launched two major offensives in Iraqi Kurdistan with the support of the KDP.<sup>239</sup> Faced with the prospect of being crushed between the Iraqi and Iranian millstones, the PUK's leadership reluctantly reached a ceasefire with Baghdad and started negotiations over Kurdish autonomy in December 1983.<sup>240</sup>

Negotiations between the PUK and the Iraqi government made significant progress until late

---

<sup>239</sup> The military arm of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI, a Shiite anti-government group supported by Iran) participated in the offensives and established a foothold in Iraqi Kurdistan. The KDP-SCIRI is a dyad of non-coethnic rebel groups that could have fought each other but did not, as my argument would lead us to expect. However, given the paucity of the evidence at my disposal and the fact that Iranian sponsorship of both groups is also a plausible explanation for the absence of inter-rebel war, no firm conclusions can be drawn (Hanna Batatu, "Shi'i Organizations in Iraq: Ad-Da'wah al-Islamiyah and al-Mujahidin," in Juan R. I. Cole and Nikki R. Keddie, eds., *Shi'ism and Social Protest*, New Haven, CO: Yale University Press, 1986, p. 197; Dilip Hiro, *The Longest War: The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict*, New York: Routledge, 1991, pp. 96-97, p. 150; Hiltermann 2007, p. 29).

<sup>240</sup> PUK's leaders Mulazin Omar, Faridoun Abd-Al Qader (author's interviews) and Nawshirwan Mustafa (1998, pp. 331-2) explicitly say that the decision to negotiate with Baghdad was dictated by the difficult military position of the group, in addition to the hope that Saddam may be willing to make real concessions given Iranian successes on the battlefield. These accounts are made more credible by the fact that Adel Murad, who opposed the decision to negotiate with Baghdad in 1983, responded as follows to the author's explicit question about whether there were realistic alternatives for the organization: "Not really. That was a really dark moment; Iran had a very bad attitude towards PUK and had a good relationship with the KDP... The peshmergas needed a break, they had been fighting since 1976; plus there was a sense that Saddam was weak (Iran had made some advances in the South), so he would make concessions. This was an opportunity for Kurdish rights to be advanced. In fact, Baghdad seemed very willing to make those concessions and Baghdad's attitude was reflected in public statements favorable to Talabani and against Barzani." Several analysts concur in interpreting the PUK's decision as powerfully influenced by its unsustainable military position (see, in particular, Kutschera 1997, pp. 60-1; McDowall 2004, 348-9; and Hiltermann 2007, pp. 31-2).

1984, when Saddam, under Turkish diplomatic pressure, eventually refused to sign the agreement.<sup>241</sup> The two sides benefited from the ceasefire while it lasted: the PUK got an opportunity to recuperate and reorganize its forces, while receiving weapons from Baghdad; the government was able to move a large number of troops from Kurdistan to the main front against Iran in the south.<sup>242</sup> In early 1985, PUK returned to the rebel camp and it started a gradual reconciliation with the parties of the National Democratic Front and with Iran. Increased coordination rather than violent confrontation was the main pattern of interaction between the PUK and the Front in the years 1985-1988.<sup>243</sup>

Quite clearly, there was no window of opportunity in these years. The PUK may have been the strongest group but all sources consistently suggest that it was not markedly more powerful than the KDP, which was well entrenched in Badinan.<sup>244</sup> There was no reason to expect an all-out fight between the PUK and the KDP to be short and cheap; in fact in case of a PUK's attack on the KDP, things could have easily turned out as in 1978 – when the KDP inflicted a serious blow on the PUK as the latter tried to establish a presence in Badinan.

---

<sup>241</sup> The importance of Turkey's veto of the agreement is emphasized in the author's interviews with Adel Murad and Faridoun Abd-Al Qader and in Nawshirwan Mustafa's memoirs (1999, p. 81) as well as in the secondary literature (e.g., Kutschera 1997, pp. 63-5; Quil Lawrence, *Invisible Nation: How The Kurds' Quest for Statehood Is Shaping Iraq and the Middle East*, New York: Walker & Company, 2008, p. 32). Likely a significant improvement in Iraq's position in its war against Iran in 1984 and in early 1985 (Iraq had managed to blunt the Iranian offensive in the spring of 1984 and started receiving increased support from the United States) contributed to Baghdad's decision to turn its back to the PUK (Bulloch and Morris 1992, pp. 156-7; Kutschera 1997, p. 64; Efraim Karsh, *The Iran-Iraq War, 1980-1988*, Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2002, p. 47; Hiltermann 2007, pp. 40-56). Talabani offered an interpretation of Saddam's decision along these lines: "Then, however, it became clear that the Iraqi army could successfully defend Basra and Saddam Hussein went back on his word" (unpublished interview, Kurdish Library Museum, Brooklyn, New York).

<sup>242</sup> Nawshirwan Mustafa 1999, p. 83; author's interview with Faridoun Abd-Al Qader; Stepehn C. Pelletiere, *The Kurds: An Unstable Element in the Gulf* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1984), pp. 186-187; McDowall 2004, p. 351.

<sup>243</sup> Author's interviews with Faridoun Abd-Al Qader and Adel Murad.

<sup>244</sup> Van Bruinessen 1986, p. 27; author's interviews with Mulazin Omar and Shoresh Hadji.

Less obviously, the serious threat that the PUK faced in 1983 had receded by 1985. Interviews with PUK's leaders and their memoirs unmistakably point to two major reasons for the threat reduction. First, the PUK had significantly weakened the Socialists and the Communists parties in 1983. As part of an overall effort to improve its relations with the Front and Iran, the PUK now offered the Socialists and the Communists to resume their operations in Sorani areas, but the arrangement under which this occurred reflected the major imbalance of power between the PUK and the two groups: the Socialists and the Communists were not allowed to raise taxes (one of the issues that had caused friction between them and the PUK in the past), but would financially depend on transfers provided by the PUK.<sup>245</sup> The Socialists and Communists thus had less of an opportunity to operate as a Trojan horse for KDP's penetration of Sorani areas. Second, the Iranian attitude toward the PUK was now radically different, which significantly reduced the threat directly posed by Tehran and may have contributed to the PUK's reconciliation with the KDP.<sup>246</sup> As Faridoun Abd-Al Qader (a PUK high-ranking member involved in diplomatic contacts with Iran) pointed out, Iran became much more forthcoming after the PUK resumed its fight against Baghdad: Tehran was now willing to talk to the PUK and gradually started providing military support to the group.<sup>247</sup> PUK-related subjects point to the deterioration of Iran's military position in 1985 compared to 1983 as an explanation for Tehran's change of heart: in 1983 the Iranian forces had successfully been on the offensive for almost two

---

<sup>245</sup> Author's interview with Adel Murad; Nawshirwan Mustafa 1999, p. 115.

<sup>246</sup> "We had come to the conclusion that in order to reach intra-Kurdish peace we needed to make peace with Iran" (Nawshirwan Mustafa 1999, p. 102).

<sup>247</sup> Author's interview. Tehran's fears that the PUK may still have been engaged in negotiations with Baghdad apparently subsided when a delegation of Iranian intelligence officers visiting Talabani witnessed Iraqi jets bombing the group's headquarters (interview with Sherdel Abdullah Howeizi, PUK's liaison with the Iranian intelligence at the time of the events, conducted by Joost Hiltermann 2007, p. 90).

years, but in the spring of 1984 they exhausted themselves in an inconclusive, major assault, followed by smaller (and similarly unsuccessful) offensives.<sup>248</sup> Another important factor behind Iran's friendlier attitude was the de facto disappearance of a major bone of contention between the PUK and Tehran – the PUK's refusal to turn against the KDPI. By the time the PUK resumed its fight against Baghdad, the KDPI was based in Iraq and was a spent force, thus no longer representing a serious threat to Iran.<sup>249</sup>

In sum, there is evidence that the absence of inter-rebel war in the years 1985-1988 can be explained by the closing of the window of vulnerability that the PUK had faced in previous years. By 1985 the Communists and Socialists did not pose a serious military threat and Iran was willing to cooperate with and support the PUK.

---

<sup>248</sup> “Iran... was in a difficult military position and needed PUK's help... Iran really needed the PUK now, as in 1985-86 Iraq was much stronger... Iran was now much more forthcoming because of its need” (author's interview with Faridoun Abd-Al Qader). Several other PUK-related subjects made similar observations in interviews with the author (Adel Murad; Mulazin Omar; Mala Baxtiar; Mam Rostam, PUK military commander at the time of the events and member of Gorran party at the time of the interview, 12 November, 2012, Sulaimania, Iraq) or memoirs (Nawshirwan Mustafa 1999, pp. 103-6). For a description of the more difficult situation Iran faced from the spring of 1984, see Cordesman and Wagner 1990, pp. 178-213; Karsh 2002, pp. 47 and 74-5. PUK-related subjects also argue that Iran's new disposition was influenced by its perception that the PUK was indeed a powerful organization because, when Baghdad and the group reached a ceasefire in 1983, Iraq was able to move a large number of forces to the southern front; moreover, after the end of negotiations with Baghdad, Iranian intelligence officers visiting PUK areas of operation could see that its peshmergas near Iraqi towns could put serious pressure on the regime (author's interview with Faridoun Abd-Al Qader; see also the interviews with the same person and with Sherdel Abdullah Howeizi conducted by Hiltermann, 2007, pp. 90-1).

<sup>249</sup> Nawshirwan Mustafa 1999, p. 106; author's interviews with Mulazin Omar and Mohammad Tofiq.

**Table 3.1: Summary of the findings of Kurdish insurgencies in Iraq**

<b>Observed outcome</b>	<b>Windows theory prediction</b>
(Inter-rebel war/peaceful coexistence)	
Barzani & Ahmed-Talabani coexist, 1962-64	✓ (no windows)
Barzani vs. Ahmed-Talabani, 1964	✓ (window of opportunity)
KDP vs. PUK, 1978	✓ (window of vulnerability)
PUK vs. National Democratic Front, 1983	✓ (window of vulnerability)
PUK & National Democratic Front coexist, 1985-88	✓ (no windows)

*Note:* The units of analysis are dyadic interactions among rebel groups (coded dichotomously as “war” or “coexistence”).

## 5. Alternative Explanations and Endogeneity

In this section, I discuss alternative explanations for inter-rebel war and address potential concerns about endogeneity. Fotini Christia’s minimum winning coalition argument (MWC) represents the most well-established general alternative explanation for inter-rebel war, emphasizing a different power-driven logic than window theory and downplaying the role of ethnicity.<sup>250</sup> MWC logic would predict rebel infighting when one rebel group (or a rebel coalition) is sufficiently strong to take on both the government and other rebels. This argument does not fare well in the Iraq case. In the years 1962-1964, both the Barzani and the Ahmed-Talabani were weaker than the government in terms of territorial control (Christia’s preferred measure of the balance of power). At the moment of their maximum expansion in the entire case – the spring of 1963 – the “liberated areas” of the Barzani and Ahmed-Talabani factions combined amounted to 33 percent of Iraqi Kurdistan (see Figure 3.3 below).<sup>251</sup>

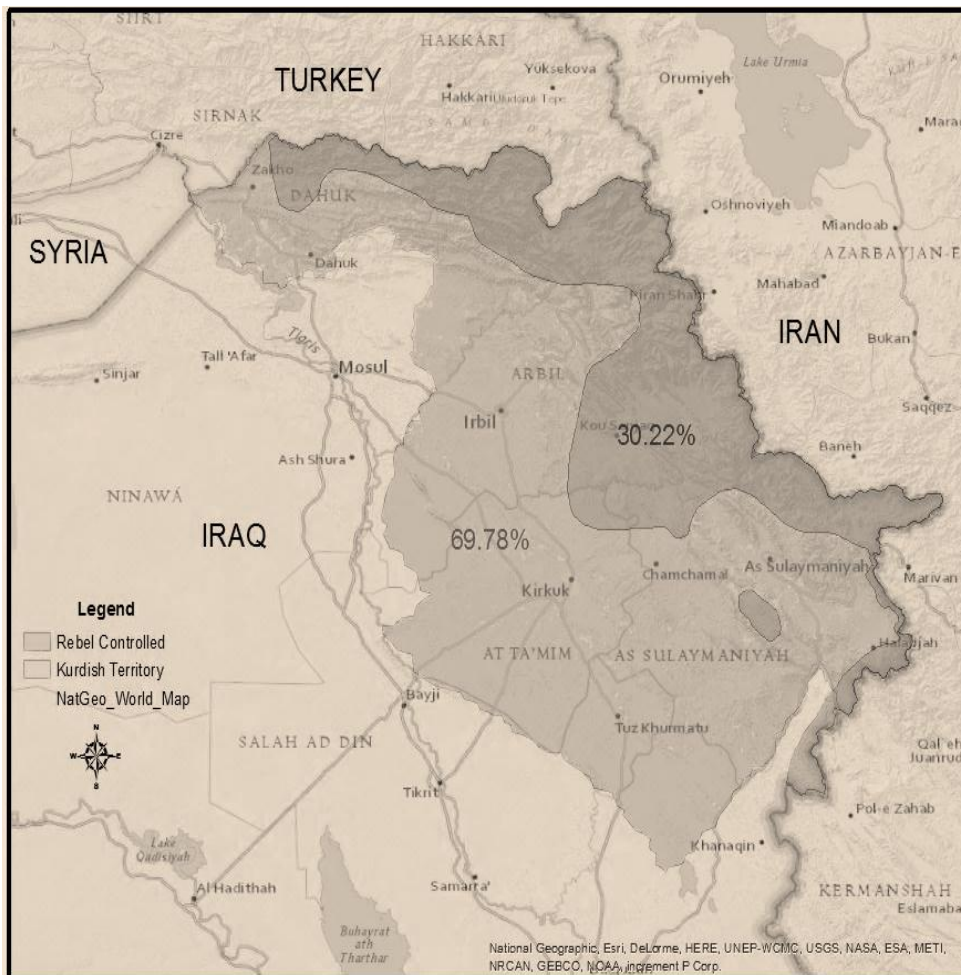
---

<sup>250</sup> Christia 2012.

<sup>251</sup> Figure 3.3 presents geo-referenced information extrapolated from maps reported in Farid Asasard, *Political Atlas of Kurdistan Region, 1914-2005* (Iraqi Kurdistan, 2010), pp. 65-70 and 81-2 (translated for the author from Kurdish Sorani by Dr. Kamal Soleimani in New York City). The darkest area indicates the maximum extent of rebel territorial control in the years 1961-1988, which was achieved in the spring of 1963, before the second round of



**Figure 3.3: Maximum extent of Kurdish rebels' territorial control**



Source: Farid Asasard 2010.

fighting (p. 70). The sum of the two darkened areas in the figure is a rough approximation of Kurdish-claimed territory, as reflected in the 1966 Bazaz Plan (named after the Iraqi Prime Minister at the time), which envisioned administrative decentralization for the Kurdish provinces, whose boundaries were to be redrawn as depicted in the map on page 81 of Farid Asasard's book; Barzani accepted the plan, which became the basis for negotiations in the following years. The Kurdish-claimed areas reported in Figure 3.3 can be considered as a low-estimate of Kurdish territorial ambitions, as they do not include areas around Khanakin and Zakho that the Kurds claimed at different moments; this implies a bias favorable to Christia's theory, as a smaller territory under dispute makes it easier for rebel-controlled territory to reach the minimum winning coalition threshold. The territory under rebel control ("liberated areas") consists of zones from which the insurgents were able to exclude government forces. The Kurds had a clandestine presence even in the major towns and could conduct guerrilla-style attacks in areas outside their zones of exclusive control. These areas can be thought of as zones of mixed control. As Stathis Kalyvas pointed out, mixed areas are not necessarily areas characterized by a balance of government and rebel control (*The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006): in some areas one side may enjoy a dominant position even if it cannot completely exclude the other. However, no information is available for this more nuanced coding of territorial control.

As the two rebel groups combined controlled less than a third of Kurdish territory, MWC would predict a continuation of the rebel alliance rather the inter-rebel war that we observe in 1964.<sup>252</sup> The balance was similarly skewed in favor of Baghdad if measured by troop numbers and firepower. At the beginning of 1963, the government had at its disposal in Iraqi Kurdistan 35,000 troops (twelve infantry brigades, supported by armor and airpower) and 5-10,000 policemen, as well as large numbers of Kurdish and Arab militiamen.<sup>253</sup> By contrast, the forces commanded by the Barzani and the Ahmed-Talabani factions numbered 25,000 overall, including both regular fighters and militias, and they possessed only light weapons.<sup>254</sup>

MWC logic does not shed any light on the second episode of inter-rebel war, in 1978, either. In the years 1976-1978, the PUK and the KDP did not control any territory and operated in small bands of guerrilla fighters, constantly on the move for fear of government attacks.<sup>255</sup> Similarly, the balance of power in terms of troop numbers and weaponry was starkly favorable to the government: Baghdad had at its disposal over 150,000 regular troops armed with modern heavy weapons, while the combined insurgent forces did not exceed a few thousand lightly

---

<sup>252</sup> The percentage of rebel territorial control would of course be much lower if one were to consider the entirety of Iraq rather than areas claimed by the Kurds as the denominator.

<sup>253</sup> Dana Adams Schmidt, *Journey Among Brave Men* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1964), p. 70; Vanly 1970, p. 147; Pollack 2002, pp. 158-61. By the spring of 1963, Baghdad deployed three-quarters of its army in Kurdistan.

<sup>254</sup> O'Ballance 1973, p. 104 and pp. 172-3; Pollack 2002, p. 165.

<sup>255</sup> Martin Van Bruinessen (1986, p. 27, note 5) reports that in this round of fighting the Kurdish insurgents did not have "liberated areas" as they did up until 1975; the government was able to send patrols wherever it wished. The insurgents were especially weak in the first years: under constant threat of government attacks, they did not stay in the same place for long (Nawshirwan Mustafa 1997, pp. 173 and 212-4).

armed individuals.<sup>256</sup> MWC logic would wrongly predict in 1978 a continuation of the existing rebel alliance in the face of government's overwhelming superiority.

While MWC would correctly predict the absence of inter-rebel war in the years 1979-1982, it would also lead us to wrongly expect the insurgents to abstain from infighting in 1983. Over the years 1979-1983, the military position of the rebel movement as a whole improved, as the Iraqi forces were increasingly absorbed in the fight against Iran. However, the government's power still dwarfed the rebels' in terms of territorial control, troop numbers and weaponry. The rebels had more freedom of movement in Kurdistan than in the years 1975-1978, but they did not manage to establish "liberated areas" from which they could exclude government forces as before 1975.<sup>257</sup> In this period, the Iraqi military underwent a major expansion, more than doubling the size of its regular ground forces (to over 400,000 men) and acquiring large numbers of heavy weapons, tanks and aircraft.<sup>258</sup> There are no precise figures on the number of Iraqi troops actually deployed in Kurdistan and rebel fighters in this period, but there is no doubt that there were many more government forces than all rebel forces combined (which remained lightly

---

<sup>256</sup> Nawshirwan Mustafa (1997, p. 278) reports at 200,000 the size of Iraqi armed forces in this period. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies, the Iraqi armed forces grew from 158,000 to 222,000 in the years 1976-1980 (*The Military Balance*, London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1976-1980). There are no precise figures on the size of insurgent groups, but they were almost certainly below 10,000. Farid Asasard estimates the number of PUK's fighters in 1978 at 1,200 (author's interview); Van Bruinessen (1986, p. 27) reports a rough estimate of overall 9,000 fighters in 1981 for all the main groups operating in Kurdistan combined (the PUK, the KDP, the Socialist Party and the Communist Party). The figure would be significantly lower for the KDP and the PUK in the years 1976-1978, as the two insurgent organizations grew rapidly only after the beginning of the Iran-Iraq War (author's interview with Shores Hadji).

<sup>257</sup> Van Bruinessen 1986, p. 27; author's interviews with Shores Hadji and Adnan Mufti.

<sup>258</sup> *The Military Balance*, London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1980-1983; Pollack 2002, p. 182. This figure does not include the paramilitary forces of the Popular Army, which grew from about 250,000 at the beginning of the war to around 500,000 in the following years (Al-Marashi and Salama 2008, p. 154).

armed).<sup>259</sup> Faced with a starkly more powerful government, according to Christia's argument, in 1983 the rebel groups should have remained at peace, as they did in 1978-1982.

Finally, MWC theory would correctly predict inter-rebel cooperation in the years 1985-1988, as the insurgent groups were still much weaker than the government, but it cannot explain why they fought each other in 1983 under a roughly comparable balance of power.<sup>260</sup>

A distinct set of alternative explanations would focus on rebel groups' features (in particular, ideology and the degree of centralization) and individual rebel leaders' characteristics (e.g., their temperament, world views and mental health). This set of alternative explanations is not empirically convincing either. Whatever ideological differences may have existed between the various groups, they do not seem to be driving the overall pattern of inter-rebel war.<sup>261</sup> The conservative Barzani faction, the more leftist post-1975 KDP and the avowedly Marxist PUK, all resorted to force against their rivals at some point. Moreover, groups' relatively stable ideological positions cannot explain why they fought in some moments but not others. The

---

<sup>259</sup> Van Bruinessen (1986, p. 27) estimates at about 9,000 and 13,000 the overall size of the rebel forces in Kurdistan in the years 1981 and 1985, respectively; 13,000 can thus be taken as the highest plausible estimate of rebel numerical strength in the years 1979-1983, which were characterized by steady growth in rebel ranks. Consistently, Nawshirwan Mustafa (1998, p. 332) reports that the PUK had 4,500 fighters in late 1983. McDowall (2004, p. 351) reports that after the PUK and Baghdad reached a ceasefire agreement in late 1983, Iraq could move four-six divisions that had been battling the PUK to the southern front (Farid Asasard claims that the PUK was able to pin down one fourth of the Iraqi ground forces, author's interview). Iraqi divisions would often consist of more than three brigades and thus their size typically would exceed 10,000 men (Caitilin Talmadge, *Authoritarian Armies on the Battlefield: Explaining Fighting Power in Non-Democratic Regimes*, book manuscript, George Washington University, 2013, chapter 4, p. 18). This implies that at least 40,000 Iraqi troops were deployed in areas where the PUK operated. Moreover, the government presence in Kurdistan included regular units deployed against the KDP and the other rebel groups (for which I do not have specific figures) and thousands of pro-government militias.

<sup>260</sup> For figures on the rapid growth of the Iraqi ground forces in the years 1980-1987, see Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1988), p. 294.

<sup>261</sup> The significance of the ideological differences between the KDP and the PUK after 1975 is debated. Several of my non-PUK interviewees argued that the PUK's "aggressive behavior" was driven by its "Marxist fanaticism." However, analysts point out that the actual policy and ideological differences between the two parties are elusive (David Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Opportunity, Mobilization and Identity*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 197; Bengio 2012, p. 161).

ideological argument could take a dyadic form, according to which, for example, Marxist-leaning rebel groups are not necessarily more belligerent than others but dyads of Marxist and, say, conservative groups are especially at risk of fighting each other due to their ideological distance.<sup>262</sup> However, this version of the argument is not supported by the evidence either: at different moments, the Marxist PUK fought and cooperated with all Kurdish groups, spanning a broad ideological range (including the Communist Party).

A further variant of the ideological argument would focus on the distinction between hardliners and moderates (or “hawks” and “doves”) as the source of tensions that may escalate in inter-rebel war.<sup>263</sup> This too is unconvincing. The fact that a ceasefire between the government and the Barzani faction (which the Ahmed-Talabani faction firmly opposed) preceded the 1964 episode of inter-rebel war would seem consistent with the argument. But a closer examination suggests otherwise. As soon as Barzani dealt with his rivals, he started criticizing the government for the insufficient guarantees of Kurdish rights inserted in the new constitution and vocally demanded autonomy, essentially adopting the more hardline position of the Ahmed-Talabani faction.<sup>264</sup> On its part, the latter was willing to flip to the government’s side in 1966 after the

---

<sup>262</sup> For a similar argument applied to international alliances, see Mark L. Haas, “Ideology and Alliances: British and French External Balancing Decisions in the 1930s,” *Security Studies* 12 (4), 2003: 34–79.

<sup>263</sup> This distinction can be conceptualized in terms of the nature and scope of groups’ policy goals (e.g., autonomy rather than independence) or of their willingness to pay costs and run risks to achieve their full objectives rather than accepting less extensive concessions from the government (Stephen Stedman, “Spoiler Problems in Peace Processes,” *International Security* 22 (2), 1997: 5-53; Andrew Kydd and Barbara Walter, “Sabotaging the Peace: The Politics of Extremist Violence,” *International Organization* 56 (2), 2002: 263-96; Ethan Bueno de Mesquita, “Conciliation, Counterterrorism, and Patterns of Terrorist Violence,” *International Organization* 59 (1), 2005: 145-76; “Terrorist Factions,” *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 3 (4), 2008: 399-418).

<sup>264</sup> Jawad 1981, pp. 176-8.

Barzani faction had pushed it into Iran.<sup>265</sup> These two facts (combined with the process evidence discussed above) cast serious doubts on the hypothesis that inter-rebel war occurred because of a deep divergence of preferences between the two groups about the acceptability of compromise with the government. Similarly, there is no indication of any appreciable ex-ante difference along the hardline-moderate spectrum between the PUK, the KDP and the other main Kurdish rebel groups in the years 1976-1988; in any case, whatever difference may have existed likely did not drastically change over time and thus cannot explain why the groups fought each other early on but cooperated at later stages of the war.<sup>266</sup>

Decentralized, incohesive or undisciplined groups may be especially prone to inter-rebel war as skirmishes initiated by foot soldiers or low-level commanders might escalate to the point of engulfing the entire organization.<sup>267</sup> All Kurdish armed organizations displayed some problems of discipline and limited leadership's ability to control local units.<sup>268</sup> However, as with ideology, organizational structure cannot explain why some groups fought in some phases but not in others, as there is no indication that the phases in which violence erupted were characterized by especially high levels of decentralization or indiscipline. In addition, the process

---

<sup>265</sup> Jawad 1981, pp. 205-214.

<sup>266</sup> All the main Kurdish rebel groups joined a formal alliance in 1987 – the Iraqi Kurdistan Front – with the common objectives of Saddam's overthrow, the creation of a democratic system and the recognition of Kurdish national rights (David McDowall, *The Kurds: A Nation Denied*, London: Minority Rights Group, 1992, p. 107).

<sup>267</sup> For examples of studies arguing that organizational structure shape different types of rebel groups' behavior, see Patrick Johnston, "The Geography of Insurgent Organization and its Consequences for Civil Wars: Evidence from Liberia and Sierra Leone," *Security Studies* 17 (1), 2008: 107-37; and Jeremy M. Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>268</sup> For one example about the KDP and one about the PUK, see, respectively, Kutschera 1997, p. 39, and Nawshirwan Mustafa 1999, p. 31.

evidence that I presented above suggests that wars started following explicit decisions of the organizations' leaders, even if it is likely that the occurrence of skirmishes contributed to the creation of a climate of fear and distrust, which in turn factored in the rebel leaders' calculations.

For similar reasons, individual leaders' characteristics do not provide a powerful explanation for intra-Kurdish: various leaders, with different personalities, backgrounds and worldviews, opted for inter-rebel war in some phases but not in others, based on the strategic environment in which they operated.<sup>269</sup> In addition, some important decisions appear to have been the outcome of sustained debate within the organization, rather than the manifestation of the whims of a single, unchallenged leader. For example, the fateful decision of the PUK's leadership to embark on a major expedition to establish a supply route to Syria in 1978 was the result of a long deliberation process, as discussed above. Talabani, the PUK's leader, initially even opposed the idea of opening negotiations with Baghdad in late 1983, later acquiescing to the initiative out of respect for the opinion of the majority of the leadership council.<sup>270</sup>

Another set of alternative explanations focuses on other actors: the incumbent and third-party states.<sup>271</sup> Clearly, one cannot tell the story of Kurdish infighting without bringing Baghdad

---

<sup>269</sup> Adnan Mufti (author's interview) made this point eloquently: "They say that some people belong to the cities and some people belong to the mountains but after a while on the mountains you start thinking that way" [referring to the behavior of "people from the mountains", i.e., driven by a logic of power rather than democratic principles, as mentioned before during the interview]. Among my Kurdish informants and scholars of the case (e.g., Ali-Fouat Borovali, "Kurdish Insurgencies, the Gulf War, and Turkey's Changing Role," *Conflict Quarterly*, fall 1987: 29-45, esp. p. 33), a dyadic version of the individual-level explanation of infighting is especially popular. According to this view (which includes elements of the ideological explanation), intra-Kurdish violence in 1964 resulted from the clash between Barzani's tribal, authoritarian, and religious personality and the intellectual, urban, and secular sensibilities of key figures in the Ahmed-Talabani faction (with these tensions persisting between the new organizations that emerged after 1975). The same objection presented above applies to this version of the argument: as constant, personality differences cannot explain variation over time.

<sup>270</sup> Nawshirwan Mustafa 1998, p. 332.

<sup>271</sup> For an argument about how third-party states can affect inter-rebel relations by attenuating commitment problems, see Navin A. Bapat and Kanisha D. Bond, "Alliances between Militant Groups," *British Journal of Political Science* 42 (4), 2012: 793-824.

and Tehran into the picture. The key concern, however, is whether their roles in the story point to systematic dynamics that the theory does not account for or, worse, that it predicts should not occur. As noted, Iran powerfully influenced the PUK's threat environment. But this is consistent with the theory: groups' threat environment is determined by a host of factors, including in some cases the attitudes and behavior of powerful neighbors. This raises a potential question of endogeneity as external actors' policies may well be influenced by the actions (actual or anticipated) of the rebel groups. In fact Tehran's negative attitude towards the PUK was in part a function of the group's refusal to help it crush Iran's Kurdish rebels. This fact would represent a problem for my argument if the reasons behind the PUK's behavior reflected a general alternative explanation (in which case one could say that my theory focuses on intervening variables) or indicated some dynamic that my argument expects should not happen. My interviews with Faridoun Abd-Al Qader (at that time a key PUK's official responsible for diplomatic relations with Iran) shed important light on the group's calculus vis-à-vis Iran. Pressed as to why the PUK refused to acquiesce to Iranian demands and thus appeared to prioritize solidarity with its ethnic brethren across the border over considerations about the military advantage of an alliance with a much stronger Iran, the subject responded:

“We could not trust that Iran would do what it said it would [i.e., provide military support to the PUK] once we had put pressure on the KDPI and Komala [another Iranian Kurdish rebel group]. We did not know whether Iran would be a good ally; there was a perception of Iranians being really smart at deception and manipulation.”

Beyond asserting their desire to survive and make gains in their struggle against the incumbent, my argument does not have anything to say about the origins and nature of rebel



groups' preferences (in this case, the PUK's commitment to its Iranian Kurdish allies) and their perceptions of third parties' preferences (e.g., the fact that the PUK leaders distrusted Tehran as they thought that the Mullahs would inevitably think of them as Kurds, unbelievers and Marxists).<sup>272</sup> However, the fact that, in the presence of conflicts of interest, rebel groups appear concerned about the enforcement of costly cooperative arrangements with other actors (including third-party states) is fully consistent with my argument's emphasis on commitment problems in anarchy. Thus, while relations between rebel groups and third-party states are certainly an important topic for further research, Iran's role in the case does not pose a problem for my argument.

What about the role of the Iraqi government? Inter-rebel wars could occur because governments manage to pit groups against each other (for example, by generating fear that the other group is cooperating with the incumbent) or because governments somehow induce a group to attack another.<sup>273</sup> Alternatively, a group may attack a rival in the hope or expectation of government concessions (as a reward or as an acknowledgment of the group's strength signaled by success in inter-rebel war).

The fact that groups may mistrust each other because of the possibility (or actual fact) that they are in contact with the government (and may at some point even cooperate with it to other groups' detriment) is fully consistent with my theory: fear of defection is one of the possible reasons a group would want to attack its rivals. My argument would be falsified only if

---

<sup>272</sup> The PUK's ideological and emotional reluctance to abandon the KDPI and Komala clearly emerges from my interviews with Faridoun Abd-Al Qader, Mulazin Omar and Shores Hadji as well as from Nawshirwan Mustafa's memoirs (1998, p. 267). In interviews, Faridoun Abd-Al Qader and Shores Hadji argued that Iran's leaders perceived the PUK through ideological ("Communists"), religious ("Sunnis") or ethnic lenses ("Kurds").

<sup>273</sup> For an argument about how government strategies may create fissures within rebel movements, see Patrick Johnston, "Negotiated Settlements and Government Strategy in Civil War: Evidence from Darfur," *Civil Wars* 9 (4), 2007: 359-77. On "wedge strategies" in international politics, see Timothy W. Crawford, "Preventing Enemy Coalitions: How Wedge Strategies Shape Power Politics," *International Security*, 35 (4), 2011: 155-189.

the fear that a rebel group is already (or is bent on) cooperating with the government were sufficient to cause inter-rebel war regardless of the presence of windows of opportunity or vulnerability. However, the empirical evidence presented above suggests this is not the case: inter-rebel war did not occur in the absence of windows of vulnerability or opportunity, even if rebel groups feared that a rival may defect. This is well illustrated by the first episode of inter-rebel war. According to several observers, Barzani feared since 1963 that the Ahmed-Talabani faction might collude with the government during an offensive. But Barzani launched his hegemonic bid only when a window of opportunity opened up, following the 1964 ceasefire with the government.<sup>274</sup> The instance of inter-rebel war that lends itself most easily to be interpreted as engineered by the government occurred in 1983: the PUK attacked the Socialists and Communists in May and a few months later reached a ceasefire agreement with Baghdad.<sup>275</sup> According to this interpretation, by attacking its rivals the PUK complied with a government request or tried to “impress” Baghdad with a display of military strength.<sup>276</sup> Conclusively disproving this alternative explanation is hard, as individuals that may have access to relevant decision-making information (PUK-related subjects) have an incentive to portray the PUK’s

---

<sup>274</sup> In fact, the immediate motive for Barzani’s hegemonic bid is unlikely to have been fear of defection as the Ahmed-Talabani faction opposed the 1964 ceasefire agreement on the grounds that the government was weak and thus insurgents should continue putting military pressure on it.

<sup>275</sup> There is no indication that the 1978 episode of inter-rebel war was in any way provoked by the Iraqi government. The PUK had meetings with the Iraqi government in 1977 and then in the aftermath of the clash. On both occasions the contacts did not make headways as the Iraqi government was not willing to make concessions (besides cooptation offers for the PUK’s leaders) given the position of extreme weakness of the rebels; so the group continued its guerrilla activities. In 1979 Baghdad had similarly inconclusive contacts with the Socialist Party (Kutschera 1997, p. 42; author’s interview with Adel Murad; Nawshirwan Mustafa 1997, pp. 181-5 and 337-8).

<sup>276</sup> Dr. Mahmoud Osman said that in 1982 the Iraqi government asked him to prove that the Socialist Party controlled the area it claimed, which he interpreted as an exhortation to attack other groups; he interpreted the 1983 attack by the PUK as motivated by a similar request (reported in Van Bruinessen 1986, p. 27).

actions in a positive light.<sup>277</sup> A key piece of evidence, however, casts doubt on the hypothesis that the PUK's attack reflected some form of ongoing cooperation with the government, later formalized in the ceasefire agreement: the PUK was engaged in heavy fighting against the government in October 1983 – i.e., *after* its attack against its rivals and *before* the ceasefire with Baghdad.<sup>278</sup>

Finally, it is important to address explicitly concerns about the endogeneity of windows of opportunity and vulnerability in the case. The potential problem is not that the purported causes of inter-rebel war are themselves caused by some other factor, but rather that windows of opportunity and vulnerability could be just the last link in a longer and more complex causal chain, which my theory would not capture. I deal with these concerns both theoretically and empirically. My theory has a certain amount of “built-in” endogeneity, as windows of vulnerability may emerge from the spiral dynamic of the security dilemma, as discussed in Chapter 2. This dynamic was most clearly at play in the 1983 episode of inter-rebel war: the PUK found itself in a vulnerable position as the other rebel groups coalesced against it, which likely occurred as a response to the PUK's military strength and the perception by the other groups that it was throwing its weight around. Whether the apparent spiral dynamic was in fact driven by some distinct underlying factor is an empirical question, which I tried address with the

---

<sup>277</sup> This is the case even for former PUK's members who are now in Gorran. While this splinter party has been critical of the PUK on a range of issues, its members may not have an incentive to be candid about the 1983 episode as Gorran's leader Nawshirwan Mustafa commanded the PUK forces in that attack.

<sup>278</sup> Nawshirwan Mustafa 1998, p. 332. This battle is also reported by More (1984, p. 125) and Kutschera (1997, p. 64). This evidence does not allow me to rule out the possibility that the hope of reaching some form of understanding with Baghdad in the future may have contributed to shape the PUK's actions. This, however, does not represent a problem for my argument as long as *both* the attack against the group's rivals and the desire to cooperate with Baghdad were a function of the window of vulnerability that the PUK faced, as discussed above. This is further supported by the observation that the KDP, which was in a more favorable situation given its alliance with Iran and also had contacts with Baghdad in the period November 1982-May 1983, did not establish any cooperative arrangement with the government (Kutschera 1997, pp. 58-9).

process evidence presented above. Albeit the evidence on the two episodes of inter-rebel war driven by window of vulnerability logic is far from perfect, there is no indication of such a confounding underlying factor in the historical record.

Windows of opportunity may also be endogenous, as states may refrain from bringing to bear their full offensive power on the insurgents so as to induce inter-rebel war.<sup>279</sup> However, this is not necessarily the case. Governments may not always follow the logic of my argument in trying to provoke inter-rebel war: for example, they may sometimes adopt confrontational “wedge strategies”, which aim at creating tensions between rebel groups by increasing counterinsurgency pressure.<sup>280</sup> Even when governments do intend to trigger inter-rebel violence by reducing the threat that they pose, rebel groups may not take the bait. In fact, we should expect rebel groups to make critical decisions based on indicators and signals of government capabilities and intentions that are hard to fake (e.g., the state of the armed forces and the political climate in the capital). In any case, in the instance of window of opportunity in Iraq, endogeneity does not seem a problem: the Iraqi government may well have realized that the 1964 ceasefire would bring about intra-Kurdish conflict, but its overriding concern appears to have

---

<sup>279</sup> There is, indeed, some evidence that the Iraqi government was interested in driving wedges between insurgent groups. For example, in a document (dated 3 April, 1988) addressed to the General Military Intelligence Directorate, an Iraqi intelligence officer recommended to “create division among the insurgency movements in order to reach [sic] a state of confusion and disharmony among them” (Conflict Records Research Center, CRRC, Saddam Hussein collection, SH-GMID-D-000-859, p. 11). At a much later date (13 August, 2002) and in a different political context, the Iraqi intelligence apparatus displayed a similar interest in stoking intra-Kurdish tensions, by carrying out “secret plans to increase the severity of conflict between the tribe of al-Jaf and the faction of Jalal Talabani,” issuing a forged letter in which the tribe appeared to denounce “the behavior of Jalal Talabani faction toward the tribe of al-Jaf” (CRRC SH-IISX-D-001-519, p. 5).

<sup>280</sup> Crawford 2011. In fact, immediately after the sentence of the April 1988 document quoted in the previous footnote, the same intelligence officer recommends sustaining, rather than reducing, the military pressure on the rebels: “Continue the military operations to strike at insurgents’ locations wherever they’re at and liquidate them” (CRRC SH-GMID-D-000-859, p. 11).

been getting some respite from the fight against the rebels in order to consolidate its power in the capital in the aftermath of the November 1963 coup.<sup>281</sup>

## **6. Conclusions**

This chapter has presented an analysis of inter-rebel war in Iraqi Kurdistan in 1961-1988, showing that the ebb and flow of intra-Kurdish fighting was shaped by the opening and closing of windows of opportunity and vulnerability. Consistent with one of the observable implications of my argument about coethnicity as a cause of inter-rebel war, the Barzani faction was able to extend its authority to areas formerly under its rival's control without facing any resistance. However, the absence of variation on the coethnicity dimension in the case (all rebel groups are Kurdish) does not allow me to conduct a full test argument. I thus now turn to the cases of the insurgencies in Eritrea and Tigray, where rebel groups had opportunities for contact and thus conflict both across and within ethnic boundaries, for a more thorough and direct empirical examination of the coethnicity hypothesis.

---

<sup>281</sup> I do not have direct information on government decision-making; this interpretation of Baghdad's actions as driven by an urgent need for a break from the fight is suggested by independent observers (Vanly 1970, pp. 216-7; O'Ballance 1973, p. 120; Jawad 1981, p. 154) and Barzani's affiliates (see the excerpts of my interviews with Sa'id Kaka and Khursheed Shera reported above).

## **Chapter 4**

### **Insurgencies in Eritrea and Tigray, 1961-1991**

Even dogs fight each other only after they deal with the hyena.  
- Eritrean saying

We are all nationalists, and we have one thing to do now – win our independence. The rest can be worked out later.

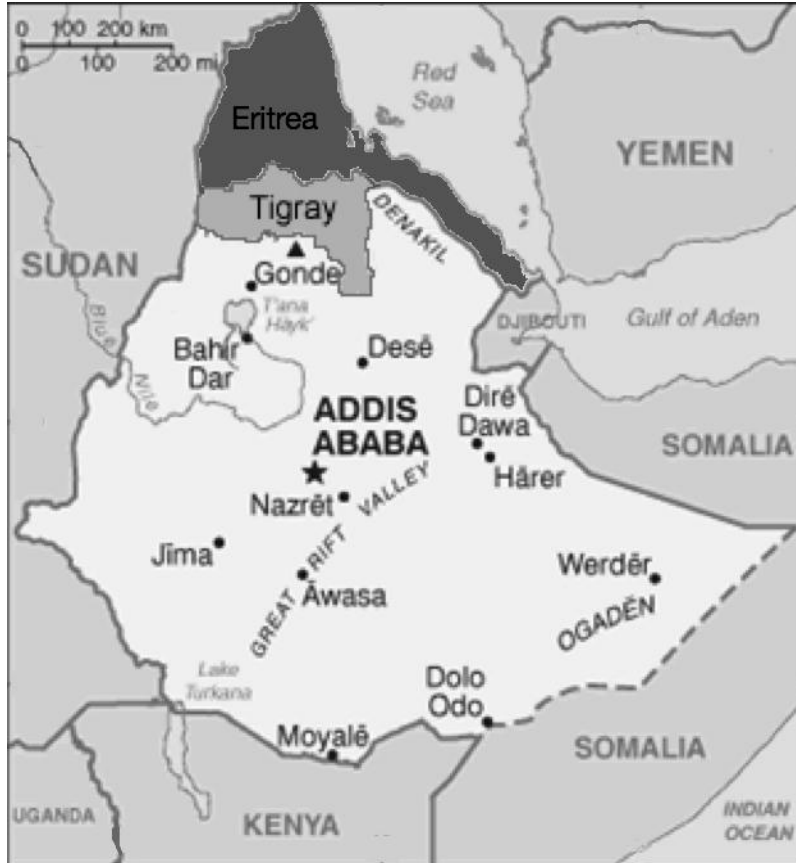
- Manna Bahre, Eritrean Liberation Front's political organizer (c. 1974)

A close friend can become a close enemy  
- Ethiopian proverb

#### **1. Introduction**

This chapter presents case studies of the insurgencies in the Ethiopian provinces of Eritrea and Tigray in the years 1961-1991. Both cases are characterized by substantial variation on the dependent variable, thus presenting several opportunities to observe my theory's causal mechanisms at play and to conduct within-case controlled comparisons. More crucially, this combination of cases offers a chance to test the coethnicity hypothesis. From 1975 on, multiparty rebellions raged in the adjacent provinces of Eritrea and Tigray, pitting, respectively, Eritrean and Tigrayan insurgents against Ethiopian government forces (see Figure 4.1 below). Tigray's and Eritrea's rebels had contacts (and thus opportunities for violent conflict) with both coethnic and non-coethnic organizations, which allows me to empirically assess my claim that inter-rebel war is more likely to occur within, rather than across, ethnic boundaries.

**Figure 4.1: Map of Eritrea and Tigray**



As I detail below, window theory sheds much light on inter-rebel dynamics in Ethiopia. The Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and the Tigray People's Liberation (TPLF) emerged as rebel hegemons in their respective ethno-national camps through a process of violent selection, by which they ultimately wiped out weaker coethnic rivals when the Ethiopian government posed only a limited threat. Consistent with my argument, the bulk of the inter-rebel fighting took place within, rather than across, ethnic lines; crucially, in spite of serious political and strategic disagreements, the EPLF and the TPLF refrained from fighting each other and eventually jointly defeated Addis Ababa's forces in 1991.

Before venturing into the intricacies of the cases, it is worth reiterating two key points about my conceptualization of ethnic identity (presented in Chapter 2) as they relate to Eritrean and Tigrayan identities. First, both identities are socially constructed, as they emerged from complex historical dynamics, involving macro-structural processes, discursive practices and violence.<sup>282</sup> This, however, does not make the effects of these identities easy to escape for individuals, who face them as “social facts” when they have acquired high salience, in particular in the context of large-scale violence across ethnic lines.<sup>283</sup> Second, the Eritrean and Tigrayan identities coexist with other nested and overlapping identities. The Eritrean identity, in particular, encompasses “sub-national” religious (Muslims vs. Christians), linguistic (Tigrigna speakers vs. the speakers of other eight languages) and regional (highlanders vs. lowlanders) cleavages, while many of Eritrea’s and Tigray’s inhabitants share a “supra-national” Tigrigna-speaking identity.<sup>284</sup> As it is often the case in ethnic civil wars, in Ethiopia rebel groups formed on sub-ethnic social networks (along largely overlapping religious, linguistic and regional lines in

---

<sup>282</sup> The question of when an Eritrean national identity emerged is hotly debated and its full complexity is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Several scholars identify the experience of Italian colonialism, the subsequent re-imposition of Ethiopian centralized rule or violent resistance against it as key causes of the emergence and consolidation of Eritrean identity; see, for example, Alemseged Abbay, *Identity Jilted or Re-imagining Identity? The Divergent Paths of the Eritrean and Tigrayan Nationalist Struggles* (Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1998); Richard M. Trivelli, “Divided Histories, Opportunistic Alliances: Background Notes on the Ethiopian-Eritrean War,” *Africa Spectrum* 33 (3), 1998: 257-89; and Gaim Kibreab, “Resistance, Displacement, and Identity: The Case of Eritrean Refugees in Sudan,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 34 (2), 2000: 249-96. Analogous debates exist about Tigrayan identity (see, e.g., John Young, “Ethnicity and Power in Ethiopia,” *Review of African Political Economy* 23 (70), 1996a: 531-42; Alemseged Abbay 1998; Trivelli 1998).

<sup>283</sup> This observation, of course, does not imply that the boundaries, content and meaning of ethnic identities would not still be contested. For example, a few Eritrean intellectuals I met during my fieldwork stressed that as Tigrigna-speaking highlanders they saw themselves as sharing more of a common identity with people from the Tigray province of Ethiopia than with west Eritrea’s Muslim lowlanders. This claim is echoed in the analyses of Ethiopian nationalists, who opposed Eritrean independence, e.g., Dawit Wolde Giorgis, *Red Tears: War, Famine and Revolution in Ethiopia*, Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1989, pp. 14-25; the author was a member of the Derg and served as Ethiopia’s deputy foreign minister and government representative in Eritrea).

<sup>284</sup> Eritrea has a Muslim minority of over one third of the population, nine languages and eleven named ethnic group; Gaim Kibreab, *Critical Reflections on the Eritrean War of Independence* (Trenton, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 2008), p. 388, note 3.



Eritrea, and a primarily regional divide in Tigray).<sup>285</sup> In the presence of sub-ethnic differences, I consider rebel groups as coethnic if they are engaged in armed combat against a common “ethnic-other” government, articulate their struggle in terms of an overarching common ethnic cause and recruit (or are in principle willing to recruit) across the sub-ethnic cleavages.

The remainder of this chapter is organized as follows. Section 2 details the array of primary and secondary sources that I rely on to test my argument and alternative hypotheses. Section 3 briefly introduces each of main rebel groups pitted against the Ethiopian government to facilitate the reader’s navigation through the alphabet soup that follows. In section 4, I present an overview of the two cases and identify the variation of my dependent variable. In sections 5 and 6, respectively, I assess the empirical fit of my theory and address alternative explanations for inter-rebel war and endogeneity concerns. Section 7 concludes by summarizing my findings.

## **2. Sources**

The case studies presented in this chapter rely primarily on original interviews with former leaders of rebel groups active in Eritrea and Tigray in the years under examination, interviews conducted by other scholars,<sup>286</sup> insurgent groups’ own publications and the secondary literature. I interviewed 20 former political leaders, military commanders and senior cadres (a few multiple times) of insurgent organizations active in Ethiopia in the years 1961-1991 and a handful of lower-rank members as well as one official in the Derg-era Ethiopian army, for a total of 35

---

<sup>285</sup> Paul Staniland, “Organizing Insurgency: Networks, Resources, and Rebellion in South Asia,” *International Security* 37 (1), 2012b: 142–77; *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).

<sup>286</sup> I am especially indebted to Ethiopia and Eritrea expert Günter Schröder for generously sharing dozens of interviews with many key actors, which he conducted over the past three decades.

semi-structured interviews (see Appendix 1 for a full list).<sup>287</sup> As discussed for the Kurdish case in Chapter 3, the population of relevant subjects consists of former members of rebel organizations that may have participated to the decision-making processes I am interested in or may have reliable information about them. Thus I focused on individuals that were in positions of political leadership or military command in the relevant organizations at the time of the events.

Before embarking on my fieldwork, I compiled a list of possible interviewees, based on the secondary literature and the advice of country experts. These individuals also provided me with contact information for several subjects, enabling me to start multiple interview snowballs, which I kept rolling by asking interviewees to suggest other individuals that could be useful sources for my research. I conducted all interviews in person (in English or in Italian) except for one interview via Skype.

The outcomes of the anti-government struggle and inter-rebel wars as well as the vagaries of rebel groups' internecine power struggles inevitably affected my samples for both cases. The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) crushed its Tigray-based rivals and eventually went on to take over the government in Addis Ababa in 1991; as a result, it proved much easier to access former and current TPLF's leaders than former members of rival organizations and pre-1991 era government officials. Importantly, the inclusion in my sample of some prominent former TPLF's figures expelled from the organization (and typically living abroad) reduces the risk of exclusive reliance on informants with very similar world-views, biases and incentive structures.<sup>288</sup> Similar

---

<sup>287</sup> For biographical sketches of several of my interviewees, see Dan Connell and Tom Killion, *Historical Dictionary of Eritrea* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2011) and David H. Shinn and Thomas P. Ofcansky, *Historical Dictionary of Ethiopia* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2013).

<sup>288</sup> These individuals are: Aregawi Berhe, founding member of the TPLF, chairman of the organization in the years 1976-1979, and head of its military committee until his ousting in 1986 (interviewed by the author on August 7,

dynamics characterized the Eritrean case but with different implications for access to interviewees. The Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) expelled the rival Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) to Sudan and, having defeated the Ethiopian army on the battlefield, gained a solid grip on power in newly independent Eritrea. Important former ELF's figures (typically involved in Eritrean opposition politics) currently reside outside of Eritrea and are more easily accessible than EPLF's figures in the country, given the prevailing highly authoritarian conditions. However, I obtained access to three high-ranking former EPLF's members, who escaped as they were abroad during a purge of the ruling party in 2001.<sup>289</sup> The fact that many of the former ELF's and EPLF's members that I interviewed joined various rival opposition organizations mitigates the perils of relying on a sample of like-minded individuals reciting a single, "official" narrative.

---

2013, in The Hague, Netherlands); Fantahun "Ghidey" Zeratsion, founding member of the TPLF and vice-chairman from 1978 until his expulsion from the organization in 1985 (interviewed by the author on August 23, 2013, in Oslo); Tesfay Atsbeha, TPLF's member since 1976, he was a military commander until his expulsion around the same time as Aregawi Berhe's and Ghidey Zeratsion's ousting (interviewed by the author on August 11, 2013, in Cologne, Germany); Gebru Asrat, TPLF's member from 1975, key figure in the organization during the insurgency, politburo member and President of Tigray at the time of his expulsion in 2001 (interviewed by the author on July 30, 2013, in Addis Ababa); Mokonnen Mokonnen, TPLF member from 1975 until 1988 (interviewed by the author on September 6, 2013, in Silver Spring, MD).

<sup>289</sup> The three individuals are: Mesfin Hagos, founding member of the EPLF, military commander during the liberation struggle and Eritrea's Minister of Defense after independence (interviewed by the author on July 17-18 and August 6, 2013, in Frankfurt); Haile Menkerios, EPLF's member from 1973, Eritrea's Ambassador to Ethiopia and to the Organization of African Unity after independence and United Nations envoy at the African Union at the time of the interview (21 July, 2013, Addis Ababa); Adhanom Gebremariam, EPLF's member from 1972, he held senior military command positions during the war as well as executive and diplomatic posts in its aftermath (interviewed by the author on April 24 and June 29, 2014, in New York). These three people were part of the so-called G-15, a group of 15 high-ranking members of Eritrea's ruling party that issued a public letter criticizing the country's President for his authoritarian tendencies; the other members of the group were arrested and are still held incommunicado without charges (except for one, who subsequently repented).

### 3. The Main Rebel Groups

#### *Eritrea*

ELF. The Eritrean Liberation Front was the first group to take up arms against the Ethiopian government in 1961.<sup>290</sup> From the outset, it adopted Eritrean national independence as its goal and recruited only Eritreans. I therefore code the ELF as an Eritrean organization.<sup>291</sup> The group's strongholds were in the Eritrea's Muslim-populated lowlands, but people from other areas in the province and Christians also joined the organization as it expanded the geographic scope of its operations. Initially the ELF's leadership and fighting forces were dominated by Eritrean Muslims; however, from 1975 on the bulk of the rank-and-file were Christian, Tigriña speaking highlanders, as the government's indiscriminate violence against civilians in Eritrean urban centers drove many thousand men and women in the nationalist camp.<sup>292</sup>

ELM. The Eritrean Liberation Movement came into existence in 1958, but initially opted for a strategy of national liberation via a coup, rather than guerrilla warfare, by infiltrating the government security apparatus in the province.<sup>293</sup> Only after the ELF initiated its guerrilla campaign and the Ethiopian government started rounding up the ELM's underground cells did the organization embrace the need for armed struggle. Between 1962 and 1965 several ELM's

---

<sup>290</sup> The organization is frequently referred to as “Jebha”, “front” in Arabic.

<sup>291</sup> As discussed in Chapter 2, I identify two necessary and sufficient conditions for a rebel organization to be considered as linked to an ethnic group: 1) the rebel organization announced political aspirations directly related to the ethnic group's fate and 2) the overwhelming majority of the rank-and-file or of the leadership of the rebel organization belongs to the ethnic group.

<sup>292</sup> Kibreab 2008, p. 415, note 1; Dawit Wolde Giorgis 1989, p. 88; Michael Woldemariam, “Battlefield Outcomes and Rebel Cohesion: Lessons From the Eritrean Independence War,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 2015 (forthcoming), p. 16.

<sup>293</sup> The group is better known by the Arabic for “movement” “Harakat”.

attempts to start operations in Eritrea were thwarted by Ethiopian security forces. Eventually the ELF sealed the ELM's fate in 1965 by wiping out its small force in northern Eritrea.<sup>294</sup>

The ELM's leaders were Eritrean Muslims living in Sudan but the organization, due to its secular outlook, attracted both Christians and Muslims in the Sahel and in Keren, Massawa and Asmara (see Figure 4.2 below); like the ELF, the ELM professed the goal of Eritrean national liberation from Addis Ababa's rule. Thus I code the organization as Eritrean.

EPLF. The Eritrean People's Liberation Front was the result of a merging process of three ELF's splinters in 1972-73.<sup>295</sup> As the ELM and the ELF, the group advocated Eritrean independence (but it also explicitly embraced Marxism-Leninism) and had an exclusively Eritrean membership (but, unlike in the ELF, Christian highlanders played a dominant role in the EPLF's leadership and rank-and-file from the beginning). Therefore, the group should clearly be considered Eritrean.

ELF-PLF. The Eritrean Liberation Front-Popular Liberation Front emerged as an EPLF's splinter in 1976; the group had a military presence in Eritrea only until 1978, when it was expelled by the ELF. As its "mother" organization, the ELF-PLF is coded as Eritrean, due to its Eritrean membership and separatist agenda (but it had a more conservative ideological outlook, compared to the Marxist-Leninist EPLF).

---

<sup>294</sup>John Markakis, *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 104-9; Ruth Iyob, *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence: Domination, Resistance, Nationalism, 1941-1993* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 99-107.

<sup>295</sup> The group is often referred to by the Arabic term "Shaebia", meaning "people" or "popular". The group's original name was Eritrean People's Liberation Forces (rather than Front) until its first congress in 1977.

## *Tigray*

TPLF. The Tigray People's Liberation Front started military operations against government forces in Tigray province in 1975. The group combined Marxist-Leninism with an unmistakable ethno-national agenda, as it advocated Tigrayan "self-determination"; its members were exclusively Tigrayans. Thus the TPLF should clearly be considered a Tigrayan organization.

TLF. The Tigray Liberation Front initiated armed activities at around the same time as the TPLF; it also had an exclusively Tigrayan membership and espoused an ethno-nationalist agenda, aiming at Tigrayan independence from the rest Ethiopia. Therefore the TLF too is coded as Tigrayan.

Teranafit. The Tigray People's Liberation Movement Coordinating Committee – better known as "Teranafit", Tigrigna for "coordinating" or "unifier" – was a loose coalition of Tigray's landlords and bandits at the helm of a peasant army, which took up arms against the Ethiopian government in 1976. The organization did not have a clearly articulated ideological program, besides wanting to restore traditional Tigrayan authority in the province in the wake of the radical change brought about by the Derg revolution in 1974 (see below). In particular, Teranafit professed allegiance to Ras Mengesha Seyou, former provincial governor and powerful Tigrayan symbol as the heir in Tigray's royal line.<sup>296</sup> As prominent Ethiopia scholar John Young pointed out, "the Derg's dismissal of Tigrayan governor Ras Mengesha appeared to herald an era of even more harsh Amhara rule. In such a climate, appeals to Tigrayan national sentiments were essential for any political group wanting peasant support."<sup>297</sup>

---

<sup>296</sup> His great-grandfather was Ethiopia's Tigrayan Emperor Yohannes IV (1872-89), who was succeeded by Amhara Emperors.

<sup>297</sup> John Young, *Peasant Revolution in Ethiopia: The Tigray People's Liberation Front, 1975-1991* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 100.

EDU. The Ethiopian Democratic Union was founded by Ras Mengesha himself (together with other Ethiopian notables) in Sudan after his escape from Tigray. In 1976 the group crossed into Tigray with the bold plan of rolling up rebel groups and government forces alike on its triumphal march to Addis Ababa. Many (perhaps most) EDU fighters were from Tigray, but the organization recruited also individuals from other northern regions of Ethiopia and other key leaders were not Tigrayan.<sup>298</sup> Unlike Teranafit, the EDU did not simply aim to take over Tigray, but was bent on overthrowing the Derg regime. Due to the absence of evidence of an overwhelmingly Tigrayan composition and its political agenda not specifically focused on Tigray and Tigrayans' grievances, I do not code the group as Tigrayan. As I discuss below, this is an ambiguous case as Ras Mengesha's prominence in the EDU's leadership could be interpreted as implying a tacit Tigray-focused agenda and the group, like the other rebel organizations active in Tigray, did not experience difficulties in recruiting local peasants. I nonetheless opted for a strict interpretation of my coding criteria to avoid stacking the deck in favor of the coethnicity hypothesis, given that the EDU and the TPLF fought each other in 1976-78.

EPRP. The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) was a Marxist-Leninist anti-Derg group that mostly engaged in urban insurgency throughout Ethiopia, but also had a guerrilla presence in eastern Tigray. The literature typically labels the EPRP as pan-Ethiopian, but based on my coding criteria of ethnic political goals and ethnic membership/leadership it should be considered a Tigrayan rebel group. In fact, the bulk of the EPRP's leadership was from

---

<sup>298</sup> Aregawi Berhe, *A Political History of the Tigray People's Liberation Front: Revolt, Ideology, and Mobilization in Ethiopia* (Los Angeles: Tsehai, 2009), pp. 108-9. I do not have any figures of the ethnic breakdown of the EDU's membership.

Tigray<sup>299</sup> and its program explicitly stressed the importance of addressing the oppression of the country's ethnic groups by the Amhara-dominated central government, including Tigrayans.<sup>300</sup>

#### **4. Fratricide-ridden Histories: The Insurgencies in Eritrea and Tigray**

This section presents an overview of the insurgencies in Eritrea and Tigray. I first identify the outcomes to be explained for the two cases and then provide an historical account of how they unfolded.

##### ***The insurgency in Eritrea***

The case is characterized by four instances of outbreak of war and two episodes of temporary peaceful coexistence between Eritrean rebel groups, which constitute the variation of the dependent variable to be explained:

- The 1965 ELF's attack against the ELM.
- The 1972-1974 fight between the ELF and the EPLF.
- The suspension of the ELF-EPLF war in the years 1974-1979.
- The cooperation between the ELF and the ELF-PLF in 1976-1977 and their fight in 1978.
- The 1980-1981 EPLF's attack against the ELF.

---

<sup>299</sup> The secondary literature (e.g., Sarah Vaughan, *Ethnicity and Power in Ethiopia*, PhD Dissertation, Edinburgh University, 2003, p. 166) and EPRP- and TPLF-related subjects (author's interviews with Begasho Gurmo "Ashenafi", EPRP's foot soldier from 1977, and Tekleweini Assefa, early TPLF's member) report that the group's leadership was dominated by Tigrayans. I do not have figures on the ethnic background of EPRP's fighters; those active in Tigray are likely to have been predominantly Tigrayan until major inflows of people from Ethiopian cities in the first half of 1977.

<sup>300</sup> As prominent EPRP's leader Kiflu Tadesse noted, "resolving the national question had remained one of the major issues for the organization" (*Generation: The History of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (Part II)*, Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1998, p. 229).



The ELF started military operations against the Ethiopian government in 1961 as Addis Ababa was in the process of revoking the province's federal status (obtained at the time of its reunification with Ethiopia after Italian colonial domination and British transitional administration). The government's initial response to ELF's hit-and-run attacks was clumsy, eschewing a clear plan and devoting very limited military resources to deal with what it dismissed as mere "bandits."<sup>301</sup> As a result, the ELF gradually expanded the geographic scope of its operations and attracted more recruits.<sup>302</sup> In 1965 the Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM) challenged the ELF's monopoly of the military struggle for Eritrean independence, by trying to start military operations in the Sahel. The ELF reacted by wiping out the fledgling rival.<sup>303</sup>

Following the first, devastating government offensive in 1967, the ELF got engulfed in a long and complex cycle of internal contestation. After a reform of the organization's structure and a series of purges, the losers of the internal contest left the ELF in 1970 and by 1971 coalesced in three organizations, known as the Popular Liberation Forces (PLF), the Ala group and the Obel group.<sup>304</sup> The ELF's leadership tried to lure back the dissidents but also declared that it would not accept the existence of competing organizations in the nationalist camp.<sup>305</sup>

---

<sup>301</sup> Haggai Elrich, *The Struggle Over Eritrea, 1962-1978* (Stanford: Hoover Press Publication, 1983), pp. 35-6.

<sup>302</sup> David Pool, *From Guerrillas to Government: The Eritrean Liberation Front* (Oxford: James Currey, 2001), pp. 50-3.

<sup>303</sup> Markakis 1987, pp. 104-9; Kibreab 2008, pp. 149-52.

<sup>304</sup> The three groups are sometimes referred to as PLF I, PLF II and PLF III. For a good summary of the fragmentation process, see Michael H. Woldemariam, *Why Rebels Collide: Factionalism and Fragmentation in African Insurgencies*, PhD Dissertation, Princeton University, 2011, pp. 160-73; for a discussion of the formation of the three groups, see Pool 2001, pp. 63-70 and Kibreab 2008, pp. 164-74.

<sup>305</sup> Author's interview with Ahmed Nasser, 22 August, 2013, Stockholm. The interviewee was a member of the ELF from 1963 and in leadership positions from 1971 (including the chairmanship of the organization from 1975 to 1983); at time of the interview, he was active in Eritrean opposition politics abroad.

In late February 1972, two weeks after the leadership of the three splinters announced from Beirut their alliance and intention to merge into the EPLF, the ELF launched an attack against Obel, whose fighters were rapidly defeated. Shortly afterwards the ELF attacked the PLF, which reacted by withdrawing to northern Sahel with a few Obel's survivors and the Ala group (see Map 4.2).<sup>306</sup> The ELF proved unable to wipe out its opponents in a series of clashes that culminated in a week-long pitched battle in February 1973. This episode marked the high tide of the ELF offensive; by the following May the EPLF was steadily advancing south.<sup>307</sup>

**Figure 4.2 Map of Eritrea**



<sup>306</sup> Pool 2001, p. 71; Kibreab 2008, p. 179.

<sup>307</sup> Markakis 1987, p. 134; Pool 2001, pp. 133-6.

The intra-Eritrean fight continued along this moving front until late 1974, when the revolution in Ethiopia radically altered the political and military landscape. Amidst a series of strikes, student protests and army mutinies, a group of young, left-leaning officials known as the Derg (“Committee”) took power in Addis Ababa in the summer of 1974.<sup>308</sup> The last clash between ELF and EPLF occurred in October 1974, a few weeks after the deposition of Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie. In late 1974 and early 1975, the two groups launched a joint attack against Ethiopian forces in the Eritrean capital, Asmara. In the following three years, the ELF and the EPLF managed to wrest 90 percent of province’s territory from the government forces, weakened as they were by turmoil in Addis Ababa, rebellions throughout the country and the Somali invasion of Ogaden, in the south-east of the country<sup>309</sup>

In 1976 a third Eritrean insurgent group emerged – the Eritrean Liberation Front-Popular Liberation Front (ELF-PLF) – as the head of the EPLF’s Foreign Mission, Osman Saleh Sabbe, had fallout with the organization’s leadership in the field over relations with the ELF. The ELF initially allowed the fledgling group to operate in remote areas in western Eritrea, but in the fall of 1978 attacked its bases and pushed it into Sudan by the beginning of the following year.<sup>310</sup>

---

<sup>308</sup> The Marxist turn of the Derg occurred at the end of the year, under the influence of the student movement and a Marxist-Leninist party known by its Amharic acronym of Meison (Dawit Wolde Giorgis 1989, pp. 14-25). For good accounts of the history of the Ethiopian revolution, see Christopher S. Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Edmond J. Keller, *Revolutionary Ethiopia: From Empire to People's Republic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution, 1974-1987: A Transformation from an Aristocratic to a Totalitarian Autocracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

<sup>309</sup> Erlich 1983, pp. 43-54; Markakis 1987, 136-44; Pool 2001, pp. 136-40.

<sup>310</sup> Richard Sherman, *Eritrea: The Unfinished Revolution* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1980), pp. 62-6; Markakis 1987, pp. 138-42; Pool 2001, pp. 140-2. From the end of their war in late 1974, the ELF and the EPLF engaged in negotiations to form a common front. In 1975 Osman Saleh Sabbe signed a unity agreement on terms that the ELF had advocated but the EPLF’s leadership in the field had opposed, which led to the denunciation of the agreement by the EPLF and the expulsion of Osman Saleh Sabbe from the organization.

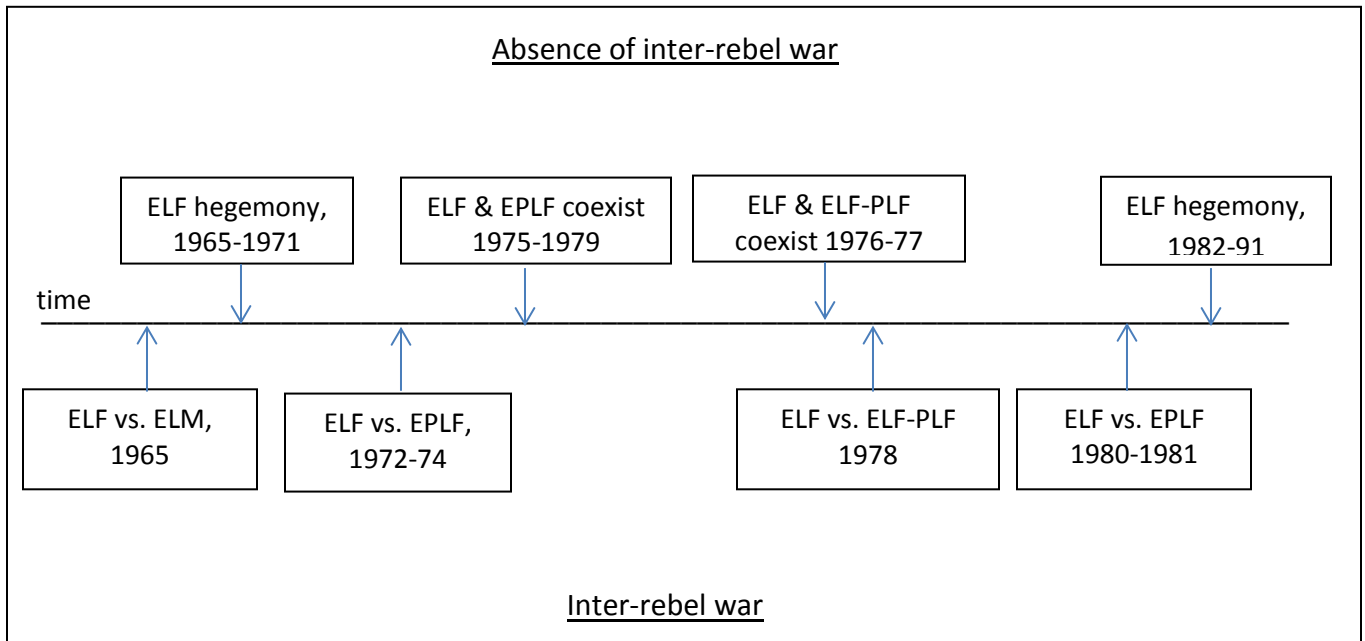
Cooperation between the ELF and the EPLF continued in the face of a radical reversal of military fortunes in 1978. Having consolidated their hold on power in Addis Ababa and benefiting from massive military support from the Soviet Union, Cuba and South Yemen, in March the Derg regime repelled the Somali invasion and in June launched a major offensive against the Eritrean rebels. Unable to contain the government's onslaught, after initial defeats the ELF took refuge in remote areas in northwestern Eritrea, while the EPLF gradually retreated to its northern Sahel stronghold. There the two organizations jointly stymied the subsequent Ethiopian thrusts. After the last unsuccessful government offensive in 1980, the EPLF, in cooperation with the TPLF, attacked the ELF, which was seriously weakened by internal problems, and defeated it in 1981.<sup>311</sup> Having established its hegemony in the Eritrean camp, the EPLF fought the government forces to a standstill in cooperation with rebel groups operating in other provinces of Ethiopia, in particular the TPLF in Tigray. By the late 1980s, the rebels managed to overcome the stalemate and inflicted a decisive defeat on the Derg in 1991.<sup>312</sup> In 1993, Eritrea achieved statehood following a referendum in which the Eritrean population voted overwhelmingly in favor of independence.

---

<sup>311</sup> Pool 2001, pp. 143-7.

<sup>312</sup> For an excellent military history, see Gebru Tareke, *The Ethiopian Revolution: War in the Horn of Africa* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

**Figure 4.3: Timeline of inter-rebel war in Eritrea**



***The insurgency in Tigray***

The case is characterized by four instances of outbreak of violence between rebel groups operating in Tigray and a spell of peaceful inter-rebel coexistence, which constitute the variation on the dependent variable to be explained:

- The 1975 attack by the TPLF against the TLF.
- The TPLF's and the EPRP's peaceful coexistence in 1975-77.
- The 1976 attack by the TPLF against Teranafit.
- The 1976-1978 war between the EDU and the TPLF.
- The 1978-1979 war between the TPLF and the EPRP.

As imperial authority collapsed, several insurgent groups started operating in Tigray in 1975-1976. The first episode of inter-rebel war involved the Tigray Liberation Front (TLF) and the TPLF. The two groups engaged in several rounds of negotiations to establish some form of

cooperation in 1975. Immediately after a preliminary unity agreement was reached, the TPLF launched a surprise attack on the TLF, disarming its outnumbered rank-and-file and absorbing most of them in the organization.<sup>313</sup>

In 1976, frictions erupted between the TPLF and Teranafit, a group led by Tigray's landlords and bandits, which recruited from the local peasants and was equally hostile to the Derg regime and the Marxist TPLF. After a series of skirmishes, the TPLF attacked and defeated Teranafit. Remnants of the latter joined the Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU) in Sudan, which was planning to take over Tigray and then overthrow the Derg in Addis Ababa. In 1977, with overwhelming superiority in weaponry and troops, the EDU launched a major offensive into Tigray and forced the TPLF to retreat from its stronghold in the western part of the province. After initial setbacks, the TPLF refrained from frontally engaging the EDU and resorted to guerrilla tactics. This protracted warfare approach, combined with a government offensive against EDU's forces, proved effective in weakening the organization, which ceased to be a significant military player in Tigray by early 1978.<sup>314</sup>

While busy fighting the EDU in western Tigray, the TPLF was engaged in negotiations with the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), which had guerrilla forces in eastern Tigray. After several failed attempts at establishing a cooperative arrangement, in the spring of 1978 a series of skirmishes escalated to all-out war. Within a few weeks, the TPLF managed to defeat the less experienced EPRP, which took refuge in areas of Eritrea controlled by the ELF. Later in the year the ELF helped EPRP's remnants to reorganize and move to the neighboring

---

<sup>313</sup> René Le Fort, *Ethiopia: An Heretical Revolution?* (London: Zed Press, 1983), p. 187; Young 1997, pp. 112-3; Aregwai Berhe 2009, pp. 79-84.

<sup>314</sup> Clapham 1990, p. 185; Tiruneth 1993, pp. 124-31 and 205-8; Young 1997, pp. 100-5; Aregawi Berhe 2009, pp. 103-12 and 148-50.

Gondar province, where other EPRP units were based. EPRP and ELF forces clashed with the TPLF, as the two groups crossed Tigray to reach Wolkait, which was part of Gondar at that time but the TPLF wanted to control due to its Tigrigna speaking people and its strategic importance as the group's only direct outlet to Sudan (see Figure 4.4 below). By the end of 1979, the TPLF completely expelled the EPRP from the area.<sup>315</sup> Relations between the ELF and the TPLF kept deteriorating, due to both the ELF's support for the EPRP and disputes over administration of Eritreans living in Tigray and the demarcation of the Tigray-Eritrea border, up to the point when the TPLF and the EPLF, as mentioned above, jointly attacked and expelled the ELF from Eritrea.<sup>316</sup>

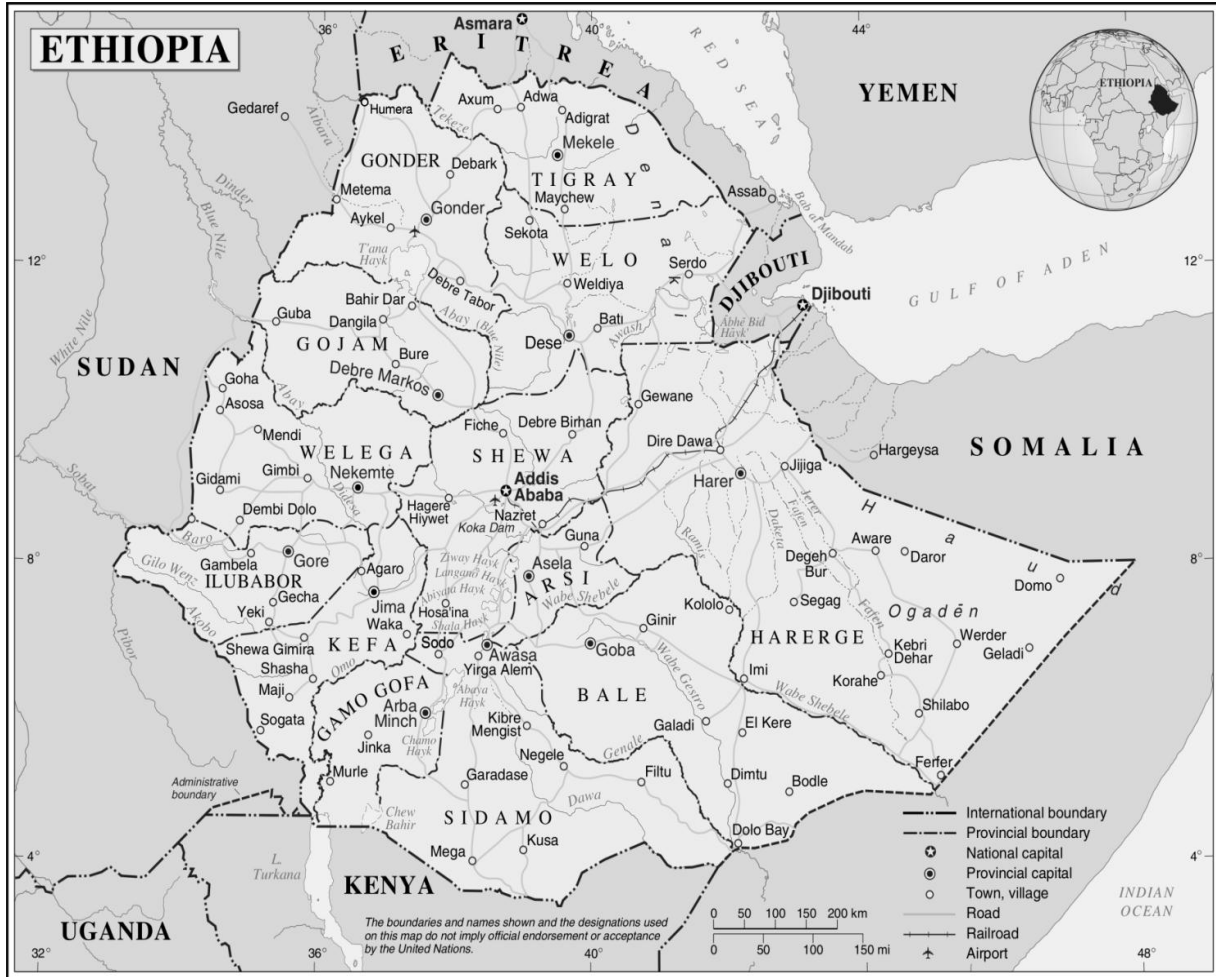
Having fully consolidated its position in Tigray, the TPLF went on to take over Addis Ababa in May 1991, at the head of a multi-ethnic rebel alliance and in cooperation with the EPLF.

---

<sup>315</sup> Kiflu Tadesse 1998, pp. 434-7; Aregawi Berhe 2009, pp. 142-50.

<sup>316</sup> Awet T. Weldemichael, "Formative Alliances of Northeast African Insurgents: Eritrean Liberation Strategy and Ethiopian Armed Opposition, 1970s–1990s," *Northeast African Studies* 14 (1), 2014: 83-122, in particular pp. 92-3.

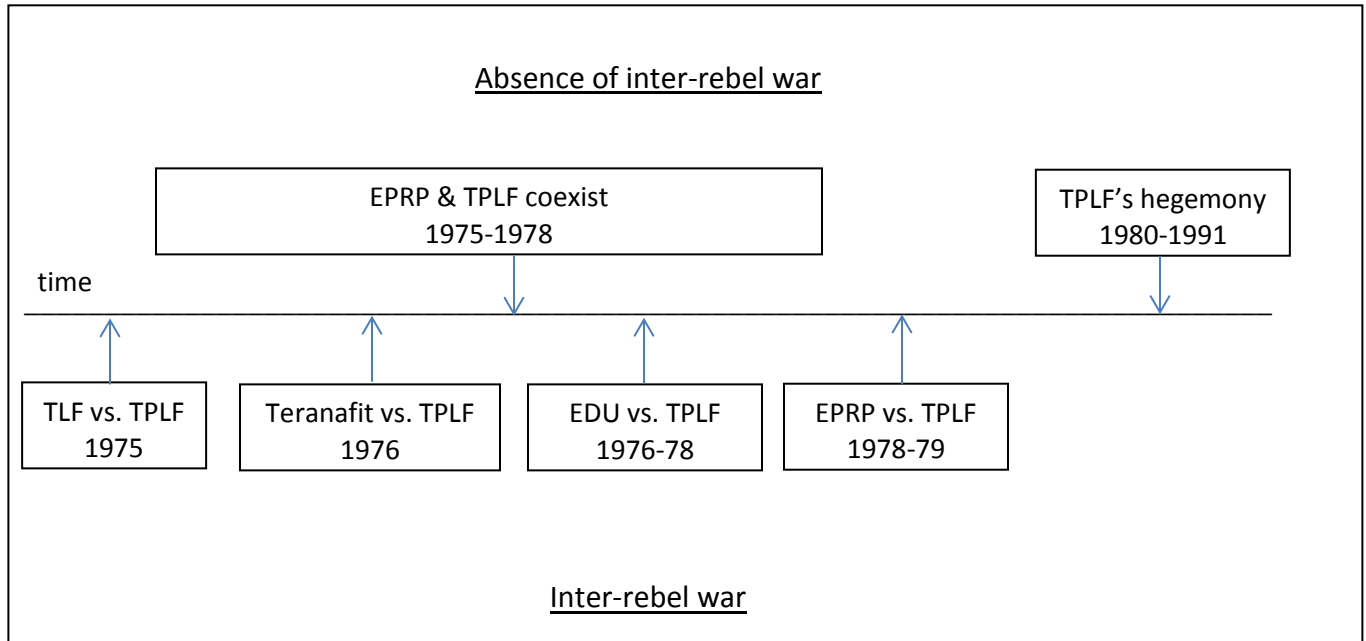
Figure 4.4: Map of Ethiopia



Note: The map reports provincial boundaries as redrawn after the end of the war in 1991.



**Figure 4.5: Timeline of inter-rebel war in Tigray**



## 5. Assessing Window Theory's Fit

In this section I assess the fit between the variation of my dependent variable (the occurrence of inter-rebel war) presented above and the predictions of window theory.

### *Inter-rebel wars in Eritrea*

The 1965 ELF's attack on the ELM. The historical evidence on the May 1965 attack by the ELF on the ELM is consistent with window of opportunity logic: in a moment in which the Ethiopian government did not pose a serious and immediate threat, the ELF attacked and defeated a weaker coethnic rival trying to start military operations in the region, thus preserving its hegemonic position in the Eritrean rebel camp.<sup>317</sup> The imbalance of power between the two groups was

<sup>317</sup> The 1965 attempt by the ELM to start a guerrilla campaign in Eritrea was the last of a series of initiatives that had been stymied by Ethiopian security forces; it was apparently prompted by the group's acquisition of arms in the black market that emerged due to the insurgency in South Sudan (Markakis 1987, pp. 104-9; Iyob 1995, pp. 99-107).

stark:<sup>318</sup> the ELF had about 1,000 troops at the time, while the ELM's initial contingent in Eritrea consisted of only 50 fighters.<sup>319</sup>

The government's initial feeble response to the insurgency created a permissive threat environment for the ELF's attack. As Ethiopia expert John Markakis notes, "[t]he imperial regime was characteristically slow to react to the build-up of the ELF. Local insurrections were nothing new, and the trouble in Eritrea did not worry officialdom in Addis Ababa unduly... For a time the government seemed inclined to believe its own propaganda image of the Eritrean nationalists as a few bands of shifta [bandits]."<sup>320</sup> In 1965, besides the local police, only one brigade of the Ethiopian army's Second Division (about 3,000 troops) was tasked with dealing with the Eritrean insurgents; the troops were mostly deployed in static garrison duty in bases in Asmara, Keren and smaller stations in other towns, with the rest of the province covered by occasional patrols.<sup>321</sup> The first major government offensive, which put serious pressure on the ELF, took place only two years later, in 1967.<sup>322</sup> The limited available evidence on the pattern of fighting between rebels and government forces provides a consistent picture of the absence of a

---

<sup>318</sup> Markakis 1987, pp. 109 and 113. The document "From the Experiences of the Eritrean Liberation Army" (Part I) reports that the ELF had about 800 fighters by the end of 1964 (available at [http://www.nharnet.com/Editorials/TodayinEriHistory/NharnetTeam\\_Jan13.htm](http://www.nharnet.com/Editorials/TodayinEriHistory/NharnetTeam_Jan13.htm), last accessed on June 18, 2014). The document is drawn from an Arabic language book published by ELF's leaders Abdullah Idris and Mohammed Hasab, *Experiences of the ELA: 1961-1981* (not dated). In interviews with the author, ELF-related subjects (e.g., Ahmed Nasser) readily point out the group's military superiority vis-à-vis the ELM's force.

<sup>319</sup> The ELM represented a more serious potential threat for the ELF than the small size of the contingent would suggest, because the former had deeply infiltrated Eritrean society, with many thousand underground cell members (Kibreab 2004, pp. 150-1).

<sup>320</sup> Markakis 1987, p. 121.

<sup>321</sup> An Israeli-trained counterinsurgency force known as the "commandos" or "101", which would prove highly effective in denying rebel access to the Christian-populated Eritrean highlands, was created only in late 1965 (Tareke 2009, p. 62; Woldemariam 2011, p. 101).

<sup>322</sup> Erlich 1983, pp. 37-8; Markakis 1987, pp. 121-2.

serious and immediate government threat to the insurgents: in 1964 and 1965 the bulk of clashes were initiated by the rebels, which suggests their ability to control the pace of their losses and thus a low risk of being wiped out by the government.<sup>323</sup>

The hegemonic intentions of the ELF emerge quite clearly from the ELF's own accounts of the episode. According to Ahmed Nasser (member of the organization since 1961 and chairman in the years 1975-1982), "the chief reason for the ELF attacking the ELM was its belief that the Field could support only one organization."<sup>324</sup> In an interview with the author, Ahmed Nasser elaborated on the organization's calculus:

"We lost our independence [in the aftermath of World War II] as a consequence of internal conflict, Ethiopian ambition and international conspiracy. The obvious lesson of this was that the Eritrean revolution should avoid new divisions so as to not to repeat the problems of the past... As a result, there must be one leadership, one army, one program. If splits occur [we thought at that time], this is going to lead to the polarization of this backward society. The attention of the world would come only if we have a strong, united political organization on the ground. Unless we achieve this, the revolution would be weakened; with many organizations there would be infighting... In 1965 the ELM gathered a group of fighters and infiltrated the Sahel. At that time the supreme council decided not to give them the opportunity to develop in Eritrea. Some the members of the ELM contingent were liquidated and some went back to Sudan."<sup>325</sup>

---

<sup>323</sup> "From the Experiences of the Eritrean Liberation Army" (Part II and Part V).

<sup>324</sup> Interview reported in Redie Bereketeab, *Eritrea: Making of a Nation* (Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 2007), p. 177.

<sup>325</sup> Author's interview. Mohammed Ibrahim Bahdurai (member of the organization from 1961) offers a consistent account: "The unity of the people and their revolution was not in very serious danger in the late 1960s but we were too much concerned not to have any rival wings in the armed struggle. The ELF's success against the armed bands

ELF's publications, too, candidly point to the hegemonic logic driving the 1965 attack on the ELM:

“[S]ome members of the ELM joined the ELF, but others who until the end of 1964 and early 1965 stood against the armed struggle sent a few fighters in the field with the intention of starting their own front. The ELF found no reason to tolerate a second front vying with the already established organization and took steps against it. The first challenge to unity of the armed struggle was easily quashed.”<sup>326</sup>

The two groups professed the same goal of liberating Eritrea from Ethiopian rule and had exclusively Eritrean leaderships and overlapping (albeit partially distinct, as discussed) bases of support among the Eritrean population; thus I consider them coethnic. Consistent with the idea of cumulative resources among coethnic rebel groups, before the clash, as the ELF expanded its guerrilla operations and the ELM started to crack under government's pressure, a number of ELM's cells (some of which had been infiltrated by

---

of the ELM was welcomed by all nationalists because everyone knew that the presence of more than one organization in the country would invite divisions based not on political lines but on the backward regional and confessional sentiments” (“Interview with Mohammed Ibrahim Bahdurai,” ELF, *Eritrean Newsletter* 44, 1 September, 1981 (available at [http://www.nharnet.com/Archives/Arch\\_2004/Oct\\_2004/NharnetTeam\\_Oct01.htm](http://www.nharnet.com/Archives/Arch_2004/Oct_2004/NharnetTeam_Oct01.htm), last accessed on July 12, 2014).

<sup>326</sup> ELF, *Eritrea: The National Democratic Revolution*, 1979, p. 32 (quoted in Kibreab 2008, pp. 151-2). A 1976 ELF document (*Eritrean Revolution* 1, August-September 1976, p. 12) also explicitly refers to the organization's decision to liquidate with force the ELM when the latter decided to start military operations in Eritrea in 1965 (cited in Sherman 1980, p. 42). Consistently, in an interview with the author, Tewolde Gebrselassie (ELF's member from 1974) recounts the key features of the episode as it was narrated to him: “we liquidated them. There was no toleration for competition in the nationalist camp” (13 July, 2013, Addis Ababa).

the ELF) joined the rival organization, taking their recruits with them.<sup>327</sup> Moreover, after the demise of its rival, the ELF reached out to former ELM's members, often persuading them to join the organization.<sup>328</sup>

*The first ELF-EPLF civil war, 1972-1974.* Window of opportunity logic also sheds much light on the onset inter-rebel war in 1972. The ELF attacked its splinters (which would complete their merge into the EPLF by 1973) in a moment of military superiority and absence of serious and immediate government threat, with the objective of reasserting its hegemony in the Eritrean liberation struggle.

The new organizations were initially very weak, operating in remote areas of Eritrea, with little and inconsistent access to external supplies and harassed by Ethiopian forces.<sup>329</sup> In early 1972, the ELF could marshal about 2,000 fighters, while the splinter groups combined had less than 500.<sup>330</sup> As Mesfin Hagos notes, “it was a one-sided war at the start. The EPLF was at an infantile stage as an organization... The first joint [of the three splinters] defensive battle occurred in April 1972; many of our units were liquidated. The balance of power was 5 to 1.”<sup>331</sup>

---

<sup>327</sup> ELF, *Eritrean Newsletter* 44, 1 September, 1981, p. 3; Markakis 1987, p. 109; Iyob 1995, pp. 104-5; interview with Saleh Ahmed Eyay (ELM's founder), conducted by Günter Schröder in 2004. One of my interviewees – Gime Ahmed – was an ELM's member until 1962, when he joined the ELF.

<sup>328</sup> Iyob 1995, p. 112.

<sup>329</sup> Pool 2001, pp. 64-8; Kibreab 2008, p. 220, note 54; Woldemariam 2011, p. 177.

<sup>330</sup> Markakis 1987, p. 133. There are several reasons why the splinters should not be considered below the threshold of absolute weakness, in spite of the fact that the ELF had more than a 3-1 numerical advantage. The splinters operated in areas far from the ELF's strongholds and could hope to obtain external support through the well-connected former ELF's leader Osman Saleh Sabbe. Moreover, the splinters could have grown significantly (as they did) by mobilizing the Christian population in the highlands, hitherto only marginally involved in the rebellion.

<sup>331</sup> Author's interview. This imbalance of power clearly emerges from several other EPLF fighters' accounts. For instance, in describing the balance of forces during the inter-rebel clash, Adhanom Gebremariam pointed out that “[t]he ELF was a much bigger organization” (author's interview, 24 April, 2014, New York; Adhanom

During the inter-rebel fight the Ethiopian government maintained a low profile. Its second major offensive had occurred in late 1970-early 1971.<sup>332</sup> In the year between June 1971 and June 1972, the insurgents initiated the vast majority of military operations.<sup>333</sup> Contemporary US intelligence assessments of the government-rebels military balance in 1972 and 1973 paint a picture of a stalemated battlefield: the rebels appeared unlikely to achieve a decisive victory but the government was in no position to overcome the impasse without a major escalation of its counterinsurgency efforts.<sup>334</sup> According to an EPLF's commander, in the years 1972-1974 the "Ethiopians barely launched any attacks against the rebels, and were largely content to watch the rebels fight amongst themselves."<sup>335</sup> In an interview with the author, Gime Ahmed, member of

---

Gebremariam joined the Ala group in 1972, just before the ELF's attack). Similarly, speaking about a major inter-rebel battle across the Sudanese border in 1973, a member of one of the splinters stressed the ELF's military superiority: "It was widely accepted that there was no force able to defeat ELF ... [its fighters] being strong and many ... Gereger was inside Sudanese territory. ELF had chased us all the way there. They were more numerous and stronger than us. They could have wiped us out if they had good planning" (quote drawn from Welde Mariam Abraham's memoirs, reported in "The Near Liquidation of the (E)PLF," a collection of memoirs of splinter groups' fighters and other documents covering the years 1972 and 1973, compiled in 1993 by Aida Kidane (available at <http://www.eritrios.net/1970s.htm>, last accessed on June 23, 2014).

<sup>332</sup> Sherman 1980, pp. 80-2 (see also Woldemariam 2011, p. 140, figure 26, which reports the major Ethiopian offensives in the years 1960-1982). Richard Sherman notes that in the years 1972-1974 the bulk of the fighting occurred between the EPLF and the ELF not between government and rebels. This does not imply that no significant government-rebels fighting occurred in that period. "From the Experiences of the ELA" (Part VI) reports three clashes between the ELF and the government in 1972, two of which were initiated by an ELF ambush, while no information on the onset of the third one is provided. Roy Pateman (*Eritrea: Even the Stones are Burning*, Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1998, pp. 132-3) and Bowyer J. Bell ("Endemic Insurgency and International Order: The Eritrean Experience," *Orbis* 18 (20), 1974: 427-50, esp. pp. 442-3) describe a pattern of fighting consisting of insurgent-initiated hit-and-run attacks in the years 1972-1974. No sources report major government offensives in this period or evidence of government's ability to inflict significant losses on the rebels.

<sup>333</sup> Annual Report of the Ethiopian Army's Second Division, June 1971-June 1972, pp. 1-10, as summarized in Awet T. Weldemichael, *Third World Colonialism and Strategies of Liberation: Eritrea and East Timor Compared* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013a), p. 123.

<sup>334</sup> INR Research Study, A. Palmer, February 24, 1972, RG 59, Central Files, "Ethiopia: Status of Eritrean Liberation Front;" INR Research Study, T. Murphy, May 10, 1973, RG 59, Central Files, "Ethiopia: Eritrean Liberation Front Persists Despite Weakness."

<sup>335</sup> Interview reported without quotation marks in Woldemariam 2011, p. 111.

the ELF's counterintelligence office both before and after the 1974 revolution, confirms that the organization's leadership was aware of the limited threat posed by the government during the inter-rebel war:

*Author:* Was there any concern about being attacked by the government in a moment in which the ELF was fighting with the EPLF?"

*Gime Ahmed:* Not so much. The civil war [between Eritrean organizations] was mostly occurring in Dankalia and Sahel, not where the government presence was strong. I was in the office for counterintelligence at that time. We intercepted government communications that indicated that the government was happy about the civil war. The government would refrain from large-scale offensives because it knew the fronts were fighting each other. It would occasionally take advantage of the infighting but more at the tactical level, with small operations.<sup>336</sup>

ELF's and EPLF's retrospective accounts of the outbreak of the intra-Eritrean war partially diverge. Unsurprisingly, both sides attribute political responsibility for starting the violence to the other. According to some EPLF's sources, the ELF had made plans to liquidate the splinters as early as June 1970; by contrast, some ELF's sources claim that the group's actions in 1972 were a response to violent provocations by the PLF and the Obel group rather than part of a pre-existing plan to crush them.<sup>337</sup> However, important pieces of evidence, including statements by leading ELF's figures, provide a consistent picture of a decision by the ELF to nip in the bud the splinters' challenge to its hegemonic position.

---

<sup>336</sup> Interviewed on July 22, 2013, in Addis Ababa; Gime Ahmed joined the ELF in 1962 and held several high-level military and intelligence positions.

<sup>337</sup> Pool 2001, pp. 70-1 and Kibreab 2008, pp. 174-8.

After several failed attempts at persuading them to return to the fold, in October-November 1971 the ELF's First National Congress condemned the splinter groups, which had refused to attend.<sup>338</sup> The Congress's resolution stated that "there can be no more than one struggle, one organization and one leadership in our country."<sup>339</sup> The Congress put forth an ultimatum to PLF's and Obel's fighters to rejoin the ELF, declaring that the group's leadership would be "authorized to take military measures against those who fail to return before the expiry of the deadline."<sup>340</sup> The Congress struck a more conciliatory note towards the Ala group, inviting *both* its leadership and fighters back to the fold without threatening the use force.<sup>341</sup> Ahmed Nasser, who was elected member of the ELF leadership's military office at the Congress, candidly described the ELF's initiatives to deal with the splinters:

*Ahmed Nasser:* The Congress decided to condemn the leadership and reach out to the base of the splinters. If these other efforts failed, the ELF leadership should take measures to preserve the unity of the revolution.

---

<sup>338</sup> In an interview with the author, Ahmed Nasser detailed the ELF's diplomatic attempts to convince the splinters to come back to the fold, which are also reported in the secondary literature (e.g., Markakis 1987, p. 127).

<sup>339</sup> Kibreab 2008, p. 173.

<sup>340</sup> Kibreab 2008 p. 174. Gaim Kibreab (2008) reports an informal translation of the Congress' resolutions, a copy of which is annexed to Al-Amin Mohamed Said, *Sowra Eritrea 'Msuguamn Mnqlqaln' Mesreh Wishtawi Mfihfahat Sowra Eritrea* (Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1994). Al-Amin was a prominent EPLF's member, so he should not be considered an unbiased source. However, Kibreab (p. 186, note 59) points out that in the over ten years between his writing and the publication of Al-Amin's book, no one has questioned the authenticity of the annexed document. Moreover, Ibrahim Mohammed Ali, a prominent ELF figure since 1964, reports essentially the same language of the resolution in his book *The March of the Eritrean Liberation Front: Beginning and End* (pp. 137-42, excerpts provided to the author by Mesfin Hagos, translated from Arabic by Max Shmookler in New York City). The contention of some ELF's sources that the resolution did not contain an authorization to use of force is also belied by a BBC broadcast dispatched by the ELF from Baghdad on December 13, 1971, stating that the organization "could resort to violent means to enforce the Congress' decision ... If they [Obel's and PLF's fighters] refused to comply, the ELF had the right to solve the disunity by military means" (ELF Broadcast from Baghdad in BBC Middle East, December 13, 1971, quoted in Kibreab 2008, p. 175).

<sup>341</sup> Markakis 1987, p. 129; David Pool, *Eritrea: Towards Unity in Diversity* (London: Minority Rights Group, 1997), p. 11; Kibreab 2008, p. 147



*Author:* Including military measures?

*Ahmed Nasser:* Yes, all necessary measures.<sup>342</sup>

My argument's emphasis on coethnicity as a cause of inter-rebel war allows us to make sense of the ELF's decision to adopt a more conciliatory approach towards the Ala group compared to Obel and the PLF. All the armed organizations involved in this episode should be considered as coethnic, given that they recruited exclusively Eritreans and shared the goal of national independence. But the ELF had less of an overlapping popular base with the Ala group than with the other two splinters: Ala's members were Christian and historically the ELF had experienced difficulties recruiting Christians and penetrating the Christian-dominated highlands.<sup>343</sup> Both ELF- and EPLF-related subjects point out that the ELF's leadership thought that using force against the Ala group would risk further alienating Eritrea's Christian community and thus its grievances would need to be addressed; by contrast, a purely military solution for the Obel group and the PLF was conceivable as their Muslim bases of support overlapped more closely with their "mother" organization's.<sup>344</sup> However, thinking that "it was just a matter of time before PLFII [Ala] would be attacked," its leaders decided to join the elements of the other two groups that had survived the initial ELF's attacks and sought refuge in

---

<sup>342</sup> Author's interview. All the ELF-related subjects with whom I explicitly discussed the episode (with the exception of Gime Ahmed) readily admit that in 1971 the ELF decided to "liquidate" the splinters due to the widely held belief that "the Eritrean field could support only one organization" (the words between quotation marks recur in several interviews). Redie Bereketeab (2007, p. 188) also reports that in an interview he conducted in 1997 with Ibrahim Idris Toteel, this top ELF's figure acknowledged the Congress' decision to use force against Obel and PLF if they refused to comply with the resolution.

<sup>343</sup> Markakis 1987, p. 117; Kibreab 2008, pp. 153-7.

<sup>344</sup> Author's interviews with Gime Ahmed; Adhanom Gebremariam; Mesfin Hagos; and Wolde-Yesus Ammar, 5 August 2013, Frankfurt (the interviewee was member of an underground ELF's cell from 1965); Pool 2001, p. 71.

the Sahel.<sup>345</sup> As the ELF ambushed in the Sahel the PLF's contingent with which the Ala group was traveling, the latter found itself fully engaged in the inter-rebel war.<sup>346</sup>

The serious and immediate threat posed by the ELF was the glue that kept together the splinter groups and prevented them from fighting each other. Reacting to what they perceived as a declaration of war by the ELF, the leaders of the splinters met in Beirut in early February 1972 to conclude a "unity agreement" – an alliance that envisioned their subsequent merge into the EPLF (finalized in 1973).<sup>347</sup> Haile Woldense, a founder of the EPLF, put it clearly:

"What was the most unifying factor was the declaration of a civil war by the ELF. Then many secondary issues have to be overlooked... When the ELF declared the intention to liquidate us [in 1972], this created an atmosphere to build some confidence, to concentrate on how much we needed each other. And this created an opportune moment to strengthen our unity."<sup>348</sup>

---

<sup>345</sup> Author's interviews with Mesfin Hagos. As Adhanom Gebremariam (an Ala's member) points out, the ELF concluded that "the Ala group should be approached and the problem with it should be solved amicably. But the resolution [of the Congress] said that the Eritrean field could only accommodate one political organization and one army" (author's interview). Even ELF-related subjects admit that the option of using force against the Ala group was not off the table; for example, Wolde-Yesus Ammar notes that "[o]bviously there was an understanding that, if Isaias [the leader of the Ala group] refused dialogue, maybe force would be used" (author's interview).

<sup>346</sup> Adhanom Gebremariam (who took part in that fight) claims that, although he did not know whether the ELF was aware that it was attacking Ala group, the episode represented a clear turning point for the group: "We were ambushed. For us that was it with the ELF. It was very sad for us, as we were against the civil war. But we needed to defend ourselves. Our decision to join the war was not calculated. We had not intended to join the war and fight the ELF" (author's interview).

<sup>347</sup> Ruth Iyob 1995, p. 116. The Obel group withdrew from the merging process but then was attacked by the ELF; most survivors joined the EPLF, while the others escaped to Sudan (Weldemichael 2013a, p. 141).

<sup>348</sup> Dan Connell, *Conversations with Eritrean Political Prisoners* (Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 2005), pp. 52 and 58. Mesfin Hagos's account is consistent: "The resolution for liquidation dates to November 1971. I took part to the Beirut meeting. The meeting was aimed at reconciling the splinters with each other. There was a clear understanding that they would be soon attacked by the ELF" (author's interview). Explaining the eventual organizational merge of the splinter groups (as distinct from the absence of fighting between them) is beyond the scope of my argument; however, fear of the ELF seems to have played a central role, as Adhanom Gebremariam's answer to my question about why the Ala group agreed to the merge suggests: "It was a survival mechanism. The ELF was attacking us, we

Given the documented stark imbalance of power between the ELF and the splinters, it is natural to ask the question: how did the ELF fail to wipe out its rivals? In fact, the outcome of inter-rebel war is rarely preordained: a group's superiority in number of fighters and weaponry would stack the deck in its favor, but contingency and intangibles such as fighters' morale, effective leadership and smart tactics may sometimes be decisive. Both sets of factors seem to have made a difference in the specific case. In 1973, the Sudanese Army interposed itself between the ELF and the splinters, which had crossed into Sudan during their fight. While the splinters may not have been on the brink of annihilation, as some observers have suggested, probably the EPLF benefitted significantly from the contingent Sudanese intervention, as all its forces were surrounded by the ELF in Sudanese territory.<sup>349</sup> The ELF also appears to have committed tactical mistakes by failing to concentrate its forces to destroy the splinters once and for all and by repeatedly launching frontal assaults against well-prepared defensive positions.<sup>350</sup>

---

had to put together our forces to survive and fight more effectively. The attack of the ELF played a great part in the decision.”

<sup>349</sup> Markakis 1987, pp. 134-5; Pool 2001, p. 134; “The Near Liquidation of the (E)PLF.” In interviews with the author, key ELF's and EPLF's figures, like Ahmed Nasser, Mesfin Hagos and Adhanom Gebremariam, deny that the survival of the splinters was at stake in the battle of Gereger in Sudan in February 1973. However, Mesfin Hagos does acknowledge that the all the EPLF's forces were “fully encircled” by the ELF; this point is confirmed by Ahmed Karar, Sudan's deputy Chief of Security, who met the leaderships of the two groups and intimated them to leave Sudanese territory (interview conducted by Günter Schröder, 19 January, 1981, Khartoum).

<sup>350</sup> According to Adhanom Gebremariam, “[t]he ELF was a much bigger organization, but it was not smart. They could have gathered all their forces and destroyed us. But instead they would send one force at the time, rather than an overwhelming one. That was the wrong strategy. Theirs was kind of a bravado... We had prepared good defenses, very good trenches. The ELF force exposed itself in the open field... The ELF lacked intelligence, they did not know our tactics; they just thought we were a few hundred people, most of which had been in the ELF before” (author's interview). The fact that Osman Saleh Sabbe, one of the splinters' leaders, over time managed to provide the dissidents with better weapons (through his excellent connections to the Arab world) than those at the ELF's disposal probably also contributed to the outcome (author's interview with Ahmed Nasser; Tewdros Gebrezghier's memoirs, reported in “The Near Liquidation of the (E)PLF;” Markakis 1987, p. 135).

This suggests another question worth addressing explicitly: is the fact that the ELF persevered in its efforts to wipe out the EPLF for two years inconsistent with the argument that rebel groups should launch hegemonic bids only when they expect a quick and cheap victory? The fact that inter-rebel fighting continued indecisively until the fall of Haile Selassie suggests that at some point in the years 1972-1974 one of the key elements of window of opportunity – a clear inter-rebel imbalance of power, promising a relatively cheap and quick victory – was not in place. However, the *continuation* of war under these circumstances is not necessarily inconsistent with my argument. We should not expect instantaneous updating of beliefs by rebel leaders: it will typically take time for sufficient information to emerge for even an unbiased observer to conclude that an earlier assessment of the balance of power was wrong or is no longer valid. Moreover, cognitive and motivated biases as well as concerns about appearing weak to a rival and enhanced threat perception after war onset may contribute to generate inertia in inter-rebel fighting. As discussed below, the subsequent emergence of a concrete opportunity to liberate Eritrea from the Ethiopian government, combined with the ELF leadership's gradual realization that it would not be easy to wipe out the EPLF, probably contributed to bring the inter-rebel war to an end by late 1974.

In sum, there is strong evidence suggesting that the ELF launched a hegemonic bid taking advantage of a window of opportunity.<sup>351</sup> Key implications of the argument can be observed. The

---

<sup>351</sup> Several prominent Eritrea experts offer a consistent interpretation of the outbreak of the inter-rebel war. Haggai Elrich (1983, p. 32) observes that “[a]s soon as the EPLF was established in February 1972, the ELF-RC [Revolutionary Council, the group’s leadership organ] instigated an open and active war in an effort to enforce unity.” According to David Pool (2001, p. 71), “[t]he calculation of the ELF leadership was that it would be a short campaign,” made necessary by the “potential military and financial backing for the dissidents that would ensue.” Similarly, John Markakis (1987, pp. 133-4) argues that “[t]he merger of the opposition factions narrowed the range of options open to the untried leadership of the ELF. The forces at its disposal at this time numbered over 2,000, while the combined force of its opponents was less than a quarter of this. The temptation to use force for a swift resolution of the problem was strong... In the Spring of 1972, the ELF decided to eliminate this opposition nest and sent units to attack it.” Ruth Iyob (1995, p. 116) also notes that “[t]he establishment of an alliance between the secessionists and Sabbe [the Beirut agreement] was seen as a threat by the Revolutionary Council, which declared

ELF was significantly stronger than the splinters according to key ELF's and EPLF's figures. The government did not pose a serious and immediate threat for the ELF, as the bulk of intra-Eritrean fighting occurred in areas with limited Ethiopian military presence and the ELF understood that the government was happy to sit back and watch the insurgents bleed each other dry. Moreover, the ELF's leadership explicitly justified the decision to use force as the enforcement of the principle of unity of the nationalist struggle. However, it initially struck a more conciliatory note towards the Ala group, as its Christian base was perceived as less easily absorbable with force than those of the other splinters. Finally, faced with a serious and imminent threat posed by the ELF, the splinters refrained from fighting each other and, in fact, engaged in close cooperation.

*The absence of ELF-EPLF war, 1974-1979.* The lack of windows of opportunity and vulnerability goes a long way in explaining the absence of inter-rebel war in the years 1974-1980. By late 1974, the ELF's window of opportunity had closed. Not only had the ELF failed to crush the EPLF, but from the spring of 1973 the latter had also been steadily growing and moving its forces towards Eritrea's central plateau.<sup>352</sup> In October 1974, the EPLF had the upper hand against its rival in a major battle in the outskirts of Asmara, the province's capital.<sup>353</sup> Thus

---

war against the Tripartite Unity on February 24, 1972 to eliminate this threat." Consistently, Gaim Kibreab claims that in February 1972 the ELF decided to implement the military solution authorized by the Congress as "the formation of a united front engendered serious concerns on the part of the ELF leadership. It was in an attempt to nip in the bud the newly formed coalition that the ELF attacked" (2008, pp. 198 and 212-3). Dan Connell makes essentially the same claim and points out that the ELF's leadership in February 1972 made the final decision to use force to wipe out the splinters and ensure the unity of the anti-Ethiopian struggle (*Against All Odds: A Chronicle of the Eritrean Revolution*, Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1993, pp. 83 and 319, note 21). The one aspect in which my interpretation departs from the near consensus of the secondary literature is the timing of the ELF's decision to launch its hegemonic bid: while the authors just cited mention the February 1972 Beirut meeting of the splinter groups as the key watershed, all my interviews (both ELF- and EPLF-related) point to November 1971 as the moment in which the ELF made its decision to use force.

<sup>352</sup> Markakis 1987, p. 134; Pool 2001, pp. 133-6.

these battlefield trends did not provide any reason for the ELF to expect victory against the EPLF to be just around the corner.<sup>354</sup>

More crucially perhaps, in 1974 the opportunity cost of continued inter-rebel war was rapidly increasing as government authority was collapsing throughout the country and the conditions for liberating the province from Ethiopian presence started materializing. As David Pool notes, in the course of the spring and summer of 1974, “[t]he intensity of the conflict between the two fronts decreased as a process of protests, rebellions and mutinies evolved into the Ethiopian revolution.”<sup>355</sup> Mutinies in the Second Division of the Ethiopian army and large-scale defections to the rebel ranks among the Eritrean police and the special counterinsurgency unit (“commandos”) led to a significant reduction in Ethiopian military activities in Eritrea. The army abandoned the Eritrean countryside, enabling the guerrillas to encircle the province’s towns.<sup>356</sup> After the last inter-rebel clash in October 1974, the rebel groups reached a truce, followed by a joint offensive on the Eritrean capital in January 1975. The government forces managed to contain the offensive but Asmara remained under siege for many months.<sup>357</sup> In the following two years, the ELF and the EPLF experienced an uninterrupted series of successes,

---

<sup>353</sup> Author’s interview with Mesfin Hagos.

<sup>354</sup> According to Wolde-Yesus Ammar (member of an ELF’s underground cell since 1965), the years of inconclusive fighting had persuaded the ELF that it would not defeat the EPLF, which contributed to the decision to reach a ceasefire (author’s interview). Gherezgheher Tewelde, in discussing the factors that brought about the ceasefire between the rebel groups, consistently mentioned the fact that both sides had concluded that they could not defeat the other (author’s interview, conducted via Skype, 25 May, 2013; the interviewee was a member of the ELF from 1965).

<sup>355</sup> Pool 2001, p. 175.

<sup>356</sup> By early 1975, the Ethiopian army held only seventeen out of sixty garrisons in Eritrea (Pateman 1998, p. 134).

<sup>357</sup> Markakis 1987, pp. 136-8; Pateman 1998, pp.133-4; Sherman 1980, pp. 84-5.

expanding manifold their ranks; by 1977, the groups had extended their control to 90 percent of Eritrean territory and all major urban centers (except Asmara, Barentu and Massawa).<sup>358</sup>

The rebel organizations clearly perceived the radical effects of the Derg revolution on the military balance in Eritrea and the opportunities it offered. As an ELF's source notes:

“The dramatic events of February-March 1974 ushered in a new era in the region. The Eritrean Revolution welcomed the changes in Ethiopia and called the leaders of the uprising to start giving priority to the Eritrean question. In the meantime, the anarchic situation helped the Eritrean Revolution to openly work inside the masses. The Revolution thus could recruit large numbers in the urban centres; many people joined the Liberation Army.”<sup>359</sup>

In October 1974, Osman Saleh Sabbe, one of the EPLF's leaders, revealed his conviction that a clear moment of opportunity for the rebel movement had emerged, declaring that the separatist groups, now stronger than ever, were about to launch a new phase of the war, by switching from hit-and-run attacks in the countryside to open offensives against army camps and operations in the main urban centers.<sup>360</sup> Osman Saleh Sabbe's earlier words in 1969 had proven prescient: “We are not ready for an offensive to drive the Ethiopians out of the cities. That time

---

<sup>358</sup> Elrich 1983, pp. 71-8; Woldemariam 2011, pp. 113-7; Markakis 1987, p. 141; Pool 2001, p. 140.

<sup>359</sup> ELF, *The Eritrean Newsletter* 4, 1 September 1981, pp. 11-3. These statements are echoed in the secondary literature. For example, Markakis (1987, pp. 136-7) notes that the series of mutinies that heralded the collapse of the regime, “signaled the start of a protracted period of military disarray...and presented the Eritrean nationalist movement with a historic opportunity to reach the ultimate goal ... Eritreans in all walks of life now felt emboldened to voice their support [for the nationalist movement] ... Recruitment now reached a new high.” Similarly, Connell (1993, p. 84) observes that “the disorder that accompanied military mutinies in Eritrea, starting in February 1974, gave the liberation movements a decided boost as confrontations between them and the government escalated.”

<sup>360</sup> Osman Saleh Sabbe's interview with *Ma'ariv*, 21 October, 1974 (reported in Elrich 1983, p. 52).

may not come until the death of Haile Selassie, when we anticipate Ethiopia will probably fall apart.”<sup>361</sup>

In interviews with the author, important ELF- and EPLF-related figures explicitly associated the fall of the Haile Selassie’s regime with the end of the inter-rebel war. For example, according to Ahmed Nasser, “developments in Ethiopia, which began in Eritrea, were important. Military units there had been deeply affected by the war; there lots of wounded and soldiers were unhappy. For a while we had been asking ourselves: ‘What will happen when Haile Selassie is gone?’ We concluded that fighting [with the EPLF] must stop to exploit the new developments; the regime was weak, this was a moment of opportunity to achieve independence.”<sup>362</sup> On the EPLF’s side, Haile Menkerios makes a similar point:

“Both fronts were experiencing major inflows [of new recruits]. The situation was very different from the past, with the revolution having disrupted the government authority. There was a feeling that independence was coming. We saw the possibility of victory. Everybody was joining the front [EPLF]. People and new members were saying: ‘there is a possibility to gain independence, you have to reconcile.’”<sup>363</sup>

---

<sup>361</sup> Osman Saleh Sabbe’s interview with *Observer*, 22 June, 1969 (reported in Elrich 1983, p. 71). Consistently, Roy Pateman (1998, p. 134) observed that the “liberation forces sensed the weakness and lack of commitment of Dergue’s troops and switched from guerrilla tactics to conventional warfare.”

<sup>362</sup> Tesfay Woldemichael “Degiga” (ELF’s member from 1973) also points to the fall of imperial rule and the ensuing sense of opportunity as contributing to the end of inter-rebel fighting (author’s interview, 17 July, 2013, Frankfurt).

<sup>363</sup> Author’s interview. Eritrea experts’ interpretations of the effects of the Ethiopian revolution are consistent. Sherman (1980, p. 46) argues that “the civil war ... came to a halt in October 1974, in large part due to the altered political situation in Ethiopia [i.e., the revolution].” Similarly, Bereketeab (2007, p. 189) argues that the fall of the Ethiopian regime and the corresponding emergence of a vacuum of power was one the key factors in bringing about the end of the inter-rebel war. Pool (2001, 136-7) also seems to imply that the revolution brought about the interruption of inter-rebel violence when he writes: “*Taking advantage of vacuum in Addis Ababa*, a degree of cooperation emerged between them as the impact of the events there affected both the army and the administration in Eritrea, and in Asmara in particular where the Ethiopian army’s Second Division and the Eritrean police played an active role in protests against the center” (emphasis added).



Thus the inconclusiveness of infighting and the risk of forgoing major gains against the government in case of continued inter-rebel war contributed to the rebels' decision to reach a ceasefire in late 1974.<sup>364</sup> Consistent with my argument, as the insurgents achieved major successes on the battlefield and greatly expanded their territorial control in the following years, inter-rebel cooperation continued.

The ELF probably witnessed with much apprehension the growth of its rival's strength during the two years of infighting. We should, however, not expect the ELF to respond to the unfavorable power trend with a gamble for resurrection, precisely because the group's leadership by 1974 had had ample opportunity to realize the ineffectiveness of the military approach in tackling the challenge posed by the EPLF; expansion in the face of the collapse of government authority, instead, represented an untested potential avenue to reverse the group's relative decline.

The radical reversal of military fortunes that occurred in 1978 did not disrupt the ongoing inter-rebel cooperation. Having consolidated its grip on power in Addis Ababa and repelled

---

<sup>364</sup> The end of this episode of inter-rebel war is probably overdetermined, as several factors, besides the closure of the ELF's window of opportunity, appear to have played a role. All my interviewees, other primary sources (e.g., Bereket Habte Selassie, *The Crown and the Pen: The Memoirs of a Lawyer Turned Rebel*, Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 2007, pp. 306-9) and the secondary literature stress the importance of popular pressure on both fronts to stop fighting and focus their energies against the common enemy; in addition, the massive inflows of new members in both organizations (who did not have any stake in the ongoing inter-rebel fight and vocally called for unity) and external pressure (in particular from Sudan) are often mentioned as contributing factors. In itself, overdetermination does not undermine my argument as I do not espouse a monocausal view of the world and I do not conceive of my independent variables as neither necessary nor sufficient causes of my dependent variable, but rather as having a large probabilistic impact, i.e., affecting the chance of the occurrence of the phenomenon of interest (for a nuanced discussion of probabilistic causal claims in case study research, see Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "From Old Thinking to New Thinking in Qualitative Research," *International Security* 26 (4), 2002: 93-111). The evidence presented above about the perceptions and strategic thinking of the rebel groups suggests that the closing of the window of opportunity indeed had a probabilistic impact on the end of inter-rebel fighting (i.e., it factored in the insurgents' calculations and thus in its absence they would have been more likely to keep fighting). Moreover, there is some evidence suggesting that pressure from below for the rebel groups to reconcile, which had always existed, may have been strengthened by the perception that victory against the government was a concrete possibility (see the quote above from Haile Menkerios; in interviews with the author, Tewolde Gebrselassie made a similar observation about the fact that in their advocacy for end to inter-rebel war the Eritrean people emphasized the moment of government weakness and the opportunity of victory).

Somalia's invasion of the Ogaden, the Derg launched a major offensive against the Eritrean rebels in June. The ELF, which controlled the entire stretch of Eritrea's southern border, was no match for an Ethiopian army reinvigorated by Soviet, Cuban, Libyan and South Yemeni military support.<sup>365</sup> Badly mauled, part of the ELF's forces withdrew to remote areas in northwestern Eritrea (the Barka region), while other units followed the EPLF in its well organized withdrawal to the Sahel; there the two groups jointly fended off subsequent massive government offensives.<sup>366</sup> As my theoretical argument would predict, under enormous military strain, the rebel groups abstained from fighting each other in the years 1978-1979: inter-rebel war would have been suicidal as both Eritrean organizations were stretched thin in their desperate attempt to contain the government onslaught.

In sum, the available empirical evidence provides substantial support to my interpretation of the absence of windows of opportunity and vulnerability as a cause of the absence of inter-rebel war in the years 1974-1979. In 1974, the prospect of a cheap and rapid victory in inter-rebel war was remote, while the opportunity costs of infighting were high, given the acute weakness of the central government. Interviews with important ELF- and EPLF-related subjects suggest that the organizations' leaderships correctly perceived the new situation and this

---

<sup>365</sup> Odd Arne Westad (*The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 276-7) notes that through "an air bridge starting in September 1977 and lasting for the following eight months, the Soviets sent more than \$1 billion worth of military equipment. In late September two South Yemeni armored battalions arrived to take part in the fighting. Fidel Castro sent 11,600 Cuban soldiers and more than 6,000 advisers and technical experts, who were crucial in defeating the Somali advance. Most spectacularly of all, almost one thousand Soviet military personnel went to Ethiopia in 1977-78 to help organize the counter-offensive. By early 1978, when the tide of the war turned in favor of the Mengistu regime, General of the Army Vasilii I. Petrov, deputy commander of USSR ground forces, was in charge of Ethiopian military planning. Altogether, it was the most important Soviet-led military operation outside the area of the Warsaw Pact since the Korean War."

<sup>366</sup> For details on the five offensives the government launched between June 1978 and July 1979, see Connell 1993, pp. 157-94; Pateman 1998, pp. 135-7; and Awet T. Weldemichael, "The Eritrean Long March: The Strategic Withdrawal of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), 1978-1979," *Journal of Military History* 73 (4), 2009: 1231-71.

contributed to their decision to stop fighting. The opportunity cost of inter-rebel war remained high for the following three years, as the rebels achieved victory after victory against crumbling government forces and wrested control of 90 percent of Eritrean territory; consistent with my argument, ELF and EPLF abstained from fighting each other in this period. Then, in 1978 and 1979 the Ethiopian government launched a series of major offensives, pushing the rebels to the Sahel and Barka; consistent with my argument, the beleaguered rebels refrained from fighting each other.

*The second ELF-EPLF civil war, 1980-1981.* On August 28, 1980, the EPLF launched a surprise attack on the ELF.<sup>367</sup> Over the following months, the ELF's forces were retreating under joint EPLF's and TPLF's pressure on all fronts across Eritrea and fleeing into Sudan.<sup>368</sup> By the summer of 1981, the EPLF had completely expelled the ELF from Eritrea and extended operations to its rival's historical strongholds in the lowlands.<sup>369</sup> The EPLF's attack on the ELF is fully consistent with window of opportunity logic: in a moment characterized by a favorable imbalance of power and the absence of a serious and immediate threat posed by the government, the EPLF launched a hegemonic bid.

As Awet Weldemichael eloquently put it, "the ELF was an already collapsing edifice, waiting for an Ethiopian onslaught and a push from its domestic rival."<sup>370</sup> The imbalance of

---

<sup>367</sup> Connell 1993, p. 205.

<sup>368</sup> Pateman 198, pp. 137-138. By early November up to 100 ELF fighters were crossing the border into Kassala every day (Connell 1993, p. 208).

<sup>369</sup> Pool 2001, pp. 146-7; Bereketiab 2007, p. 194; author's interview with Adhanom Gebremariam, who commanded the EPLF's forces in the last battle against the ELF in Barka. The ELF retained thousands of fighters in camps across the border but it was unable to resume large-scale operations in Eritrea as it was partially disarmed by Sudanese government forces and further internal squabbling resulted in a three-way splintering of the organization (Woldemariam 2011, pp. 131-5; Weldemichael 2013a, pp. 164-5).

power between the rebel groups was primarily a function of the ELF's problems of internal cohesion, as several of my ELF-related interviewees stressed.<sup>371</sup> For example, according to Gime Ahmed, member of the ELF's military leadership at the time, "there were anarchic divisions within the ELF... We had very poor logistical preparation... the EPLF had better communications at all levels. In the ELF there was conflict between the military intelligence and the civilian intelligence." Similarly, Tewolde Gebrselassie (a senior cadre at that time) pointed out that "there were serious internal divisions [in the ELF]; there had been no congress since 1975, so lots of unresolved tensions within the organization. This was the most important factor [for the quick defeat of the group]. Second, the EPLF was more centralized and disciplined."<sup>372</sup>

The EPLF's leadership was fully aware of the ELF's weak state. In the words of Mesfin Hagos, a top EPLF's military commander:

---

<sup>370</sup> Weldemichael 2013a, p. 154. Several secondary sources emphasize the ELF's position of relative weakness (e.g., Dan Connell, "Nationalist Groups Pose Direct Threat to Ethiopia Regime", *The Boston Globe*, 6 September, 1980; Clapham 1990, p. 208; Pool 2001, p. 146).

<sup>371</sup> This is a recurring theme in the secondary literature too (e.g., Iyob 1995, pp. 120-1; Pool 2001, p. 147; Kibreab 2004, p. 309; Woldemariam 2011, pp. 120-2 and 129-30). In 1977, the organization was significantly destabilized by several thousand defections, which not only depleted the ELF's pool of human resources (most notably, a contingent of two thousand militants, disparagingly referred to as "Falool" or "anarchists", left the organization to join the EPLF), but also contributed to a generalized breakdown in the ELF's military discipline and an erosion of its remaining members' morale. Several authors also argue that the government offensive in 1978 had an asymmetric impact on the Eritrean fronts, weakening the ELF much more than the EPLF. The ELF was geographically most exposed to advancing government forces as it controlled the entire length of Eritrea's southern border and thus absorbed the brunt of the initial attack; by contrast, the ELF functioned de facto as a buffer between the government forces and the EPLF, giving the latter time to organize a strategic withdrawal, which allegedly allowed it to preserve much better its units and armor sources (Connell 1993, pp. 165-6; Pateman 1998, p. 82; Pool 2001, p. 146). Connell (1993, p. 174) claims that EPLF actually managed to increase the amount of armor at its disposal during the 1978-1979 government offensives, by capturing over two dozen new Soviet tanks and armored cars. However, most of my interviewees (both ELF-and EPLF-related) did not think that the losses inflicted on the ELF by the 1978 Ethiopian offensives significantly affected the balance of power between the rebel groups and the outcome of their subsequent fight (author's interviews with Gime Ahmed, Wolde-Yesus Ammar, Ahmed Nasser and Mesfin Hagos).

<sup>372</sup> Author's interviews. Several other subjects also pointed to ELF's logistical and communication problems as well as tensions in the leadership and limited organizational cohesion in 1980-1981 (Tesfay Degiga, in the ELF leadership from 1975; Wolde-Yesus Ammar, in the ELF's Foreign Office in Beirut at the time of the events; Yohannes Asmelash, ELF's member from 1974, interviewed on July 11, 2013, in Addis Ababa; Menghsteab Asmeron, instructor in the ELF's cadre school at the time of the events, interviewed on July 15, 2013, in Frankfurt).

“The ELF was weak in organization more than in numbers... By the time of the second civil war [between the Eritrean rebel groups], the EPLF was slightly bigger numerically. But the ELF organizationally was very weak. Their rank-and-file could not even read a map. We knew that very well. We had very good daily intelligence on Ethiopian troop movements and ELF positions. The ELF did not have a comparable organization; the ELF did not have a single tank nor artillery, while we had more than 100 tanks... The ELF was characterized by a complete lack of organization and leadership.”<sup>373</sup>

Adhanom Gebremariam, another EPLF’s commander provides a very similar assessment:

“The ELF was very divided internally, there were many factions, no unity of command... We had several advantages. First, we were able to decode the communications of the ELF. Second, we had a formidable mechanized army. This was formed with tanks and artillery captured from the Ethiopians. So we were able to use them and modify them, making them more flexible and more durable... Barka [the western lowland ELF’s stronghold] is an open field and we had formidable conventional army to use in open field. The ELF did not have tanks nor anti-tank weapons.”<sup>374</sup>

The balance of power was further skewed against the ELF as the TPLF supported militarily the EPLF’s attack.<sup>375</sup>

---

<sup>373</sup> Author’s interview.

<sup>374</sup> Author’s interview.

<sup>375</sup> Kibreab 2008, pp. 180-1; author’s interview with Adhanom Gebremariam.

The EPLF faced a fleetingly permissive threat environment vis-à-vis the government. The series of five Ethiopian large-scale offensives launched in the summer of 1978 ended in late 1979, with a counterattack by the EPLF that disrupted government preparations for the sixth offensive; Addis Ababa continued to actively plan for a massive attack on the EPLF but would not be able to launch operations of comparable intensity in Eritrea until 1982.<sup>376</sup> Retrospective EPLF leaders' accounts clearly suggest that they understood the constraints faced by the government in immediately launching a new all-out offensive. A 1984 interview with Isaias Afewerki, currently Eritrea's President and top EPLF's leader at that time, is worth quoting at length in this regard:

“The 1979-1980 [EPLF's] counter-offensive had indicated that the Dergue had reached the point where it could not reorganize itself and launch a new offensive or even adequately defend its positions if EPLF were to continue its attacks. Thus the Dergue set out to recruit a huge army and replace its weapons losses within a short time, waged an extensive psychological warfare and conducted an intensive propaganda and diplomatic campaign throughout the world with the aim of immediately launching its sixth offensive. The scars left over from its past offensives and our counteroffensive were conspicuous. In the first place, the Dergue was unable to replace its losses in manpower, let alone enlarge its army within a short time, because, with the failure of its offensives, the political atmosphere on which it had capitalized in 1977-1978 no longer prevailed and its attempts to recruit were frustrated... Two basic issues...continued to pose great obstacles: shortage of manpower and low morale of its army. Thus the Dergue

---

<sup>376</sup> Dan Connell, “Eritrea: Guerrilla Offensive,” *The Guardian*, 19 December, 1979. The much touted sixth offensive, known as the “Red Star”, would be launched in February 1982, after two years of preparations (Tareke 2009, pp. 225-46).

was forced to delay and postpone, several times, its sixth offensive, which it finally launched after two years of preparations and reinforcing its demoralized army with several new divisions...the counteroffensive after the 5<sup>th</sup> offensive had deterred the enemy.”<sup>377</sup>

In interviews with the author, Mesfin Hagos explicitly pointed out that the attack on the ELF was carefully timed so that inter-rebel fighting would be over by the time the government launched a new offensive under preparation:

“We were following the preparations of the Ethiopians from July 1979; we needed to kick the ELF out before the new offensive. We were following the propaganda, the military mobilization, the troop movements. We knew we would not be able to sustain a war on two fronts. We knew we had some time. The Ethiopians were saying: ‘the next offensive will be decisive.’ So they were trying to organize a massive offensive but their capacity had been weakened in the fifth offensive in July 1979. So we knew we had a long time to solve our issues with the ELF: we would either reach an agreement or we would kick them out. We knew that the Ethiopians, with Soviet support, would launch an offensive larger than before. The next offensive would be formidable. This was our last chance to defend the revolution.”<sup>378</sup>

---

<sup>377</sup> Central Bureau of Foreign Relations of the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front, *Adulis* 1(4-5), October-November 1984, p. 10. A 1982 EPLF’s publication made a similar point, noting that “[a]lthough the Ethiopian regime never wavered in its intention to launch this last offensive, the political problems, economic crisis and the chronic instability in its army delayed it for two years (EPLF, “Ethiopia’s sixth offensive and developments in the Eritrean struggle,” 25 August, 1982).

<sup>378</sup> On August 28<sup>th</sup> 1980 (the day of the beginning of the EPLF-ELF war), the Ethiopian government launched Operation “Lash” in Ogaden (eastern Ethiopia) against the Somali army and allied local insurgents (Tareke 2009, pp. 220-5). Large-scale preparations for the operation had been reported in the press in the previous weeks (e.g., Dan Connell, “Ethiopian Army Poised for New Ogaden Guerrilla Assault,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, 29 July,

Mesfin Hagos' recollection suggests that security concerns were at the root of the EPLF's hegemonic bid. There is an indisputable element of truth to this interpretation: the EPLF was under siege in its Sahel stronghold, the organization's leaders were fully aware that the government was preparing a new all-out offensive and the ELF could certainly complicate EPLF's defensive efforts (by actively cooperating with the government offensive, tacitly colluding with it and abandoning joint defensive positions, or independently attacking EPLF's guerrilla units elsewhere in Eritrea);<sup>379</sup> EPLF's concerns that the ELF could cause trouble during the next government offensive were not abstract speculations, given that the two had repeatedly been involved in low-level skirmishes since the end of their fratricidal war in 1974.<sup>380</sup> This is not to endorse the

---

1980) and observers at the time noted that the fighting in eastern Ethiopia limited the government's ability to mount a major offensive against the Eritrean rebels (Dan Connell, "Nationalist Groups Pose Direct Threat to Ethiopia Regime", *The Boston Globe*, 6 September, 1980); in fact, as Nigatu Teferi points out, the Derg government had explicitly decided to deal with the insurgency in Ogaden before focusing its full attention on Eritrea for what it expected to be a decisive blow (author's interview, 1 February, 2014, Lancaster, PA; the interviewee was a major in the Ethiopian Army until 1991 and took part in Lash and the Red Star offensive). However, in interviews with the author former EPLF's figures did not volunteer references to Lash when discussing their organization's decision-making leading to the attack on the ELF and Mesfin Hagos explicitly denied that the operation in Ogaden affected the EPLF's calculus, which instead focused on a more direct assessment of the state of preparations for the sixth offensive in Eritrea.

<sup>379</sup> In interviews with the author, Mesfin Hagos explicitly stressed fear of having to fight a two-front war during the new government offensive as a reason for the EPLF's attack; Haile Menkerios' account, by contrast, emphasizes the fact that, due to its weakness, the ELF could not provide much help against the government's onslaught but at the same time it could hinder EPLF's defensive efforts against attacks on its western flank.

<sup>380</sup> Both ELF- and EPLF-related sources express the belief that at least some of those clashes were part of a broader aggressive policy of the other group rather than mere accidents or independent initiatives of foot soldiers and low-level commanders (e.g., author's interviews with Tesfay Degiga and Mesfin Hagos). Mesfin Hagos points to the fact that the two ELF brigades manning a segment of the rebel defensive perimeter in the Sahel abandoned their positions overnight in July 1980, thus potentially exposing the EPLF to a government attack there, as the immediate trigger of his group's decision to attack the rival (Adhanom Gebremariam provides a very similar account). ELF-related sources acknowledge this fact, but offer different explanations of the ELF's decision. According to Ahmed Nasser (ELF's chairman at that time), the ELF had to withdraw their forces from the Sahel trenches because they were needed to defend the group's base area in Barka; Gime Ahmed (head of the ELF's military intelligence at the time of the events) contends that Adballah Idris (the head of the organization's military office) ordered the



EPLF's claim that the group had "only one choice: expel them [the ELF] from Eritrea or give up the fight,"<sup>381</sup> nor to deny that the EPLF's attack may also have been driven by a straightforward desire to monopolize the independence struggle, as ELF-related sources suggest.<sup>382</sup> As discussed in Chapter 2, a complex mix of security fears and expansionary ambitions may be at the root of hegemonic bids. Disentangling the relative importance of different sets of motives (in this episode as in most cases) is extremely difficult, but it is not necessary to empirically assess the empirical fit of window of opportunity logic. In fact, the key observable implications of the argument (i.e., expectations on the part of the initiator that war will be relatively quick and cheap, and that the government will not be able to take advantage of the situation) are not related to rebel groups' deep motives and, as the above discussion makes clear, are supported by the available evidence for this episode.

Finally, as my theory would lead us to expect, the EPLF did not experience any serious trouble in operating in areas that had previously been under its coethnic counterpart's sway, and a large number of ELF's fighters joined the EPLF when their group was defeated.<sup>383</sup> According to Mesfin Hagos, the "ELF's organizational weakness translated into little popular sympathy.

---

withdrawal anticipating that the ensuing EPLF's attack would help him take control of the ELF. Regardless of the rationale of the ELF's action, it is likely that the EPLF perceived it as threatening, although it is impossible to assess the extent to which it affected the group's decision to use force.

<sup>381</sup> Author's interview with Mesfin Hagos.

<sup>382</sup> E.g., author's interview with Wolde-Yesus Ammar.

<sup>383</sup> One of the three post-1981 ELF splinters (known as "Sagem") joined the EPLF. Some ELF's elements continued to conduct limited cross-border raids and guerrilla attacks in Eritrea, but this proved no more than a nuisance for the EPLF. In the late 1980s the Derg's project of regional autonomy for Eritrea's lowlands (known as "Raz Gez") found the support of a handful of former ELF's figures, but it was largely opposed by the local population (Kibreab 2008, pp. 359-64).

People flocked to our side [after the expulsion of the ELF from Eritrea] as we opened schools and clinics (the Barka area is affected by malaria) and facilitated transportation.”<sup>384</sup> Similarly, Adhanom Gebremariam noted that “the Eritrean people were willing to support any organization that would have the upper hand. They thought that the government was the primary enemy and the EPLF was a formidable force, which could defeat the enemy... Even people in Barka saw us as Eritreans and they thought that we would liberate Eritrea, even if they would still not consider us like the ELF, like their sons and daughters.”<sup>385</sup> The coethnicity of the two rebel groups is beyond doubt: they had the same goal of Eritrean national independence and their popular bases of support clearly overlapped, although there were well-known differences. In its early days, as noted, the ELF had an unofficial pro-Muslim slant and drew most of its fighters and leaders from the province’s Muslim-dominated lowlands, in particular Barka – the organization’s birthplace in the west. However, from 1975 on the bulk of the rank-and-file of both organizations were Christian highlanders, as the Derg’s indiscriminate civilian targeting drove many thousand men and women in the nationalist camp. At that point, as several observers have pointed out, often individuals would join one organization rather than the other for contingent reasons, such as the fact that they had a friend in one of the groups or that they happened to cross into a group’s area of operation when fleeing their homes.<sup>386</sup> In fact, during the 1972-1974 inter-

---

<sup>384</sup> Author’s interviews.

<sup>385</sup> Author’s interviews.

<sup>386</sup> Connell (1993, p. 84), Pool (2001, pp. 141-2) and Kibreab (2008, p. 337) report having had many conversations along these lines with ELF’s and EPLF’s members. In contrasting his decision to join the ELF in 1973 (motivated by his assessment that the ELF’s had a better political program) with that of many other Eritreans, Tesfay Degiga made a similar observation: “Encounters with members of the fronts were clandestine; there was a lot of randomness determining who you would join: you would join the first group you would bump into” (author’s interview).

rebel war, the Eritrean civilian population consistently appealed to both the rebel groups to set aside their differences and fight for the common nationalist cause.<sup>387</sup>

*The cooperation between the ELF and the ELF-PLF in 1976-1977 and the 1978 ELF's attack.* The available evidence (admittedly patchy) about the relations between the ELF and the ELF-PLF fits with window of opportunity logic: in October 1978 the ELF attacked a weaker but rapidly growing rival in a moment of limited government threat.

In 1976 the ELF allowed the EPLF's splinter led by Osman Sabbe Saleh to organize and operate in Barka, in areas under ELF's control. As Tesfay Degiga (in the ELF's leadership at that time) notes, after the split EPLF's members "in the field but sympathizing with Sabbe had to flee, the only place where they would find refuge was ELF's territory."<sup>388</sup> The new organization was extremely weak and thus my theory suggests that the ELF could tolerate it as it did not pose a meaningful threat.<sup>389</sup> Moreover, the ELF's leadership thought the ELF-PLF could offer some leverage vis-à-vis the rival EPLF, with which the ELF was engaged in difficult negotiations over the formation of a common front. As Wolde-Yesus Ammar (in the ELF's Foreign Office at that time) recalls, the organization "supported Sabbe out of power politics considerations... Some elements in the ELF's leadership wanted to weaken the EPLF by supporting Sabbe. So we gave him a base, some support and political recognition as a third force."<sup>390</sup>

---

<sup>387</sup> My interviewees repeatedly made this point, which is also emphasized in the secondary literature (e.g., Kibreab 2008, p. 336). For example, Menghsteab Asmeron recalls that the civilians that lobbied for inter-rebel cooperation in the outskirts of Asmara in 1974 would appeal to the organizations' common national base with affectionate expressions such as "you are both our sons and our daughters, the right eye and the left eye."

<sup>388</sup> Author's interview.

<sup>389</sup> In the summer of 1977, Osman Sabbe Saleh was reportedly commanding a force of "untrained refugees numbering about 1,500 which [had] yet to see combat inside Eritrea" (Dan Connell, "Eritrean Liberation Struggle Escalates," *The Guardian*, 6 July, 1977); Michael Woldemariam (2011, p. 154) estimates the ELF's strength at the time at around 18,000.

The ELF's calculus, however, changed as the ELF-PLF grew more powerful and the government offensive in the summer of 1978 reversed the previous wave of insurgent battlefield successes. In an interview with the author, after having stressed the initial state of disarray of Osman Sabbe Saleh's forces, Tesfay Degiga pointed out that "then their numbers grew and with money at his disposal Sabbe [through his well-established connections in the Arab world] started creating a bigger military camp, while for ELF it was meant to be a temporary refuge. Also as time went by, Sabbe started interfering with our organization, and they started not allowing us to go through their territory."<sup>391</sup> Skirmishes and frictions between fighters of the two groups ensued.<sup>392</sup> Of particular concern for the ELF's leadership was the fact that, allegedly thanks to his deep pockets, Osman Sabbe Saleh was managing to attract to his organization ELF members and supporters.<sup>393</sup> Concerned by the ELF-PLF's growing strength, the ELF decided to attack when the balance of power was still favorable. As Tewolde Gebrselassie succinctly put it, "Sabbe's group was growing stronger and the attack was meant to prevent that."<sup>394</sup> The potential threat posed by a growing ELF-PLF was compounded by the ELF's changed military position vis-à-vis the government. The Derg offensive in the summer of 1978 pushed the ELF towards the

---

<sup>390</sup> Author's interview. This explanation of the ELF's behavior is echoed in Markakis (1987, p. 140) and Pool (2001, p. 141).

<sup>391</sup> By the time the inter-rebel war broke out, the ELF-PLF had grown to 3,000 members (Dan Connell, "Eritrean Forces Resume Guerrilla Attacks," *The Guardian*, 3 January, 1979); John Duggan, who visited the ELF-PLF in the summer of 1978, reports a higher figure of 5,000 fighters (interview conducted by the Eritrean Gruppen Stockholm, 7 December 1978, Stockholm, provided to the author by Günter Schröder).

<sup>392</sup> Author's interviews with Tesfay Degiga, Wolde-Yesus Ammar, Ahmed Nasser and Tewolde Gebrselassie.

<sup>393</sup> Author's interview with Menghsteab Asmeron, Ahmed Nasser and Tewolde Gebrselassie.

<sup>394</sup> Author's interview. According to Wolde-Yesus Ammar (author's interview), the immediate trigger of the ELF's attack on the ELF-PLF was Osman Saleh Sabbe's attempt to extend the operations of his group to the Dankalia in eastern Eritrea in October 1978. Markakis (1987, p. 288 note 95) reports this episode, but Kibreab (2008, p. 306) suggests that it occurred in 1979, after the ELF attacked the ELF-PLF in the west.

ELF-PLF's areas of operation near the Sudanese border; the presence of Osman Saleh Sabbe's faction in the ELF's rear raised the specter of the group being "sandwiched" between two hostile forces in case the government redirected at some point down the road its attention from its fight with the EPLF to the remote areas of northwestern Eritrea where the other two organizations were based.<sup>395</sup>

At the time of the ELF's attack the balance of power was still clearly in its favor. The ELF-PLF had 3,000-5,000 members while the ELF's membership was around 18,000. Consistently, the ELF's leadership expected a quick and cheap fight. Wolde-Yesus Ammar notes that the "ELF felt it would be easy to liquidate Sabbe. His army was not very organized and his members were loyal to him only because he paid them."<sup>396</sup> Similarly, Tesfay Degiga recalls that "it was easy to push them [the ELF-PLF] out; they were a very small force."<sup>397</sup> The other key ingredient of window of opportunity – a permissive threat environment vis-à-vis the government was also in place. As noted, the fight occurred in remote northwestern areas of Eritrea, far from the thrust of the second government offensive, which focused on the EPLF.<sup>398</sup> To be sure, the ELF was not in a position of absolute security vis-à-vis the government, as it had lost territory and men in the course of the first government offensive. However, the ELF does not appear to have been concerned about an immediate government attack, but rather about the fact that the

---

<sup>395</sup> Author's interviews with Tesfay Degiga and Tewelde Gebrselassie. Only the first of the five government offensives in 1978-1979 (in June-August 1978) focused on ELF-controlled territory (Weldemichael 2009).

<sup>396</sup> Author's interview.

<sup>397</sup> Author's interview. In interviews with the author, Menghestab Asmeron and Tewelde Gebrselassie also stressed the weakness and small size of the ELF-PLF compared to the ELF.

<sup>398</sup> Dan Connell, "Ethiopia Prepares Eritrea Offensive," *The Guardian*, 22 November, 1978.

ELF-PLF was growing at its expense and might at some point have represented a security threat, in particular in the context of a government offensive in the west down the road.

In sum, the existing evidence is consistent with window of opportunity logic. The ELF tolerated a coethnic rival when it was facing an extremely low threat environment (the Eritrean insurgents were rapidly expanding and the government forces were in disarray) and the ELF-PLF was in a position of extreme weakness. The ELF, however, wiped out its rival when it became clear that it could become a threat due to its growing strength and the risk of a government offensive in the future near the Sudanese border where the two groups were based.

### ***Inter-rebel wars in Tigray***

*The 1975 attack by the TPLF against the TLF.* The broad outlines of the attack by the TPLF against the TLF in late 1975 fit with window of opportunity logic: the TPLF was stronger than its coethnic rival (which promised a rapid victory) and the government only posed a limited threat.<sup>399</sup>

The TPLF launched a surprise attack on the TLF when the two organizations were camped together for talks aimed at forming a united Tigrayan front: as the TPLF had more than three times as many fighters as the TLF, the group's leadership assigned three to four TPLF members to each TLF's fighter and tasked them with overpowering and disarming him at dawn as a secret signal was issued. Many of the members of the TLF joined the TPLF's ranks after the dissolution of their group.<sup>400</sup> TPLF-related interviewees unanimously point to the relative

---

<sup>399</sup> As noted above, the members of the two groups were from Tigray and they both had unmistakable ethno-national agendas (with the TLF advocating for Tigray's independence, while the TPLF aimed, more ambiguously, at "Tigrayan self-determination", see, e.g., Aregawi Berhe 2009, p. 81).

<sup>400</sup> Aregawi Berhe 2009, pp. 82-4.

weakness of the TLF, which had also recently experienced internal problems and large losses of membership.<sup>401</sup> The government did not pose a serious and immediate threat, because, as Aregawi Berhe notes in describing Derg's activities in the province at that time, "[i]n the vast rural areas of Tigray [sic], there was no meaningful government hold or influence to deter the mobility of the TPLF."<sup>402</sup>

*The 1976 attack by the TPLF against Teranafit.* Window theory sheds much light on this episode of inter-rebel war too. In 1976 the TPLF faced both a short-term window of opportunity and a long-term window of vulnerability: it was marginally stronger than its coethnic rival – Teranafit – and the government posed a limited threat, but the EDU was organizing a formidable force across the border in Sudan in preparation for an offensive into Tigray. Consistent with my argument, the TPLF attacked its rival before reinforcements could arrive from Sudan.<sup>403</sup>

---

<sup>401</sup> Author's interviews with Aregawi Berhe; Gebru Asrat; Mokonnen Mokonnen; and Tedros Hagos (TPLF's member since 1976, he was a cadre until he joined the leadership of the organization in 1983; he was head of the TPLF's politburo at that time of the interview, 31 July, 2013, in Mekele, Ethiopia). Some TPLF-related sources suggest the existence of a plan by the TPLF to get rid of the rival (Kahsay Berhe, *Ethiopia: Democratization and Unity. The Role of the Tigray People's Liberation Front*, Münster, Germany: Monsenstein und Vannerdat, 2005, p. 62; the author was a TPLF's member from 1975; Gebru Asrat, author's interview; and Tedros Hagos hints at the fact that the attack may have been preemptive, as the TPLF suspected that the TLF might have a plan to wipe out the TPLF's leadership, author's interview). Others stress the genuine interest of the TPLF's leadership in a merge (motivated by concerns about the ineffectiveness of having two separate organizations in Tigray and the desire to attract support from both the ELF and the EPLF), which was then overwhelmed by pressure from the TPLF's rank-and-file, opposing a merge in light of news that the TLF's leadership had allegedly committed crimes against the group's own members (author's interviews with Aregawi Berhe and Ghidey Zeratsion).

<sup>402</sup> Aregawi Berhe 2009, p. 93, note 48; the author (a founding member of the TPLF) also notes that bands of local bandits represented more of a problem for the TPLF in its first two years of existence than the government (p. 95). The negligible military presence of the Derg in Tigray until 1978 is reported in the secondary literature too (e.g., Young 1997, pp. 93 and 97). My argument cannot explain the peculiar circumstances in which the TLF's demise occurred – i.e., a sudden debilitating blow by the TPLF during ongoing unity negotiations between the two organizations rather than more open clashes on the battlefield; a variety of factors beyond those highlighted by my theory may play a role in bringing about merges between rebel groups, including pressure from external patrons, internal supporters, and rank-and-file for organizations with similar objectives to unite. My argument does suggest that rebel leaders should be concerned about the risks of a loss of power within a larger organization and exploitative behavior by a rival (for example, the use of force to turn a merge into a take-over, as in this case) and thus opportunities for this sort of surprise attack should be rare.

As the Derg seized power, it began rounding up high-ranking officials and members of the royal family. However, it hesitated to arrest the popular hereditary governor of Tigray, Ras Mengesha, for fear of provoking an uprising similar to the one that had rocked the province in 1942-1943.<sup>404</sup> Ras Mengesha thus managed to slip into Sudan, where he joined other members of the old regime and started setting up the EDU. The new organization, which enjoyed the support of Sudan (and allegedly of Saudi Arabia and several western countries), planned on launching a sweeping offensive across the border into Tigray and then overthrowing the Derg regime in Addis Ababa: supporters of Ras Mengesha in Tigray started coalescing into Teranafit even before the formal announcement of the creation of EDU in early 1976.<sup>405</sup> As TPLF's founding member Ghidey Zeratsion pointed out, the group's leadership "knew that Teranafit would grow stronger as it established relations with the EDU. We knew that the EDU was being organized in Sudan and was getting weapons. Its launch base would be Tigray."<sup>406</sup>

While the threat gathered across the border, the TPLF enjoyed a margin of superiority over Teranafit. According to most TPLF-related sources, the two organizations had a comparable number of fighters, but the TPLF was clearly superior in cohesion and discipline.<sup>407</sup> As a result,

---

<sup>403</sup> The first attack occurred in mid-June 1976; the second decisive TPLF's operation against Teranafit (which benefited from some support from EDU at that point) took place in mid-July 1976 (Aregawi Berhe 2009, pp. 106-7).

<sup>404</sup> Known as the "Woyane" rebellion (Young 1996a, pp. 532-3)

<sup>405</sup> Aregawi Berhe 2009, pp. 103-4; author's interview with Ghidey Zeratsion; Young 1997, pp. 100-2.

<sup>406</sup> Author's interview.

<sup>407</sup> Author's interviews with Ghidey Zeratsion; Aregawi Berhe; Tesfay Atsbeha; and Mulugeta Gebrehiwot (interviewed on July 29, 2014, Addis Ababa; he was a simple soldier at the time of the events and later in the TPLF's leadership until 2001); Aregawi Berhe (2009, p. 170) reports that the size of the TPLF in July 1976 at about 1,000 fighters. By contrast, according to Gebru Asrat, the TPLF had a smaller number of fighters, but he agrees with the other interviewees that the TPLF was a better organized and trained force. TPLF's historical accounts are replete with references to Teranafit's lack of a coherent organization and the prevalence among its rank-and-file of



the TPLF's leadership expected to crush its rival when it eventually attacked Teranafit.<sup>408</sup> Moreover, the TPLF believed that for some time it could grow at Teranafit's expenses by attracting its peasant members with better mobilizing techniques and a political program that would deeply resonate with their class and national aspirations. In the words of Ghidey Zeratsion, "Teranafit did not have a good political orientation; they were mostly made up of peasants and feudal lords. So we thought we could attract their rank-and-file over time"<sup>409</sup> Faced with these two competing dynamics (on the one hand, the creation of the EDU, which would eventually strengthen Teranafit and directly intervene in Tigray, and, on the other hand, the prospect of outsmarting its rival in recruitment and mobilization), the TPLF's leadership initially opted for tactical cooperation and thus postponed the inevitable violent showdown. Negotiations between the two groups led to a cooperative agreement in June 1976, in spite of occasional skirmishes between their fighters.<sup>410</sup>

The TPLF's calculus, however, was overturned by the killing of Gessesew Ayele "Sihul" – one of the group's leaders – during an altercation with Teranafit's members. Sihul had served as Tigray's representative in the Ethiopian Parliament and was well-known and popular, with a strong reputation as a staunch defender of the province. In his book of the history of the TPLF, Aregawi Berhe discusses at length the role played by Sihul:

---

criminals that had opportunistically joined for looting and peasants lured with false economic promises, neither of whom was deeply committed to fight for the group. John Young (1997, p. 101) mistakenly reports the strength of Teranafit at 10,000, which is in fact the number of fighters that took part in the 1977 offensive by the EDU.

<sup>408</sup> In interviews with the author, TPLF's founding members and leaders Ghidey Zeratsion and Aregawi Berhe stated, respectively, that the TPLF expected a rapid victory and that the leadership was very confident the group would prevail.

<sup>409</sup> Author's interview. Other interviewees made very similar observations (in particular, Aregawi Berhe and Mulugeta Gebrehiwot); see also Aregawi Berhe 2009, p. 105.

<sup>410</sup> Aregawi Berhe 2009, pp. 127-8.

[Shihul's] background and personality made an immense contribution to the smooth development of the TPLF... The people in these villages [in western Tigray, where the TPLF started operations] would definitely have been hostile to the unknown students [all other TPLF founders were undergraduates] whose activities were centred only in the towns... [Their] compliance was granted not because they understood the objectives of the emerging front or because of the young revolutionary students, but simply because Sihul, whose views they knew well and whom they respected deeply, was in it... Sihul's role in the struggle was irreplaceable. As said above, without him the unknown TPLF would have found it difficult to survive and expand...<sup>411</sup>

It appears that Sihul's sudden death undermined the TPLF's short-term strategy of outgrowing its rival while avoiding open confrontation. In an interview with the author, Aregawi Berhe indirectly suggested as much:

“He [Sihul] was a symbol for the organization; he was well-known and respected by the people... For us Sihul was key, because he represented a link between the younger and older generations as well as between the rural and urban environments. After his killing they [Teranafit's members] were boasting of being militants and sharpshooters, while we were just students.”

Moreover, as Aregawi Berhe notes in his book, the TPLF's predicament was exasperated by appearance of EDU forces in Wolkait region (in the far west) shortly after Sihul's death.<sup>412</sup>

---

<sup>411</sup> Aregawi Berhe 2009, pp. 55-6.

The limited threat to the TPLF posed by the government at the time of the inter-rebel clash comes across clearly from interviews with the group's leaders. As Aregawi Berhe recalled:

“It seemed that the government had chosen to stay away as a tactic... Something like: ‘let them weaken each other; the fight between TPLF and Teranafit is to our advantage.’ The government forces at that time were in permanent garrisons; they were not moving around much in the countryside... We thought that the government feared Teranafit more than us, because they had the support of Ras Mengesha, Sudan and others. The TPLF was small and unknown.”<sup>413</sup>

In spite of important ideological and sociological differences, the two groups can clearly be considered as coethnic based on my definition – both had Tigrayan membership and leadership and professed some form of Tigrayan ethno-nationalism (in the case of Teranafit, related to the restoration of Ras Mengesha). Local peasants did see both the TPLF and Teranafit as “sons of Tigray” and urged them to cooperate against the “Amhara” Derg.<sup>414</sup> Consistent with my argument, a large number of Teranafit's rank-and-file joined the TPLF when the latter had the upper hand militarily and the TPLF did not experience any organized resistance in areas where Teranafit previously held sway (besides the EDU's offensives discussed below).<sup>415</sup>

---

<sup>412</sup> Aregawi Berhe 2009, p. 106. Ghidey Zeratsion also points out that the expectation of EDU's imminent arrival undermined the TPLF's initial plan (author's interview).

<sup>413</sup> Author's interview. Ghidey Zeratsion made a similar observation: “We knew that the government would be happy about the infighting, because it would benefit from it. Also the government was very weak at that time, so it would not launch a major campaign.”

<sup>414</sup> Young 1997, pp. 102-3. Efforts by local elders to mediate between the two groups are also reported by Aregawi Berhe (2009, p. 105) and were mentioned by Gebru Asrat and Mokkonen Mokkonen in interviews with the author.

<sup>415</sup> Author's interview with Tedros Hagos; Aregawi Berhe 2009, pp. 107-8.

In sum, key implications of my argument can be observed in this episode of rebel infighting: the TPLF attacked a weaker coethnic rival, when its expectations of growing even stronger over time were shaken by the killing of a charismatic leader; the TPLF calculated that the government would not intervene in the fight and thus did not represent a serious and immediate threat at that time; and the TPLF managed to tap into its defeated rival's pool of resources.

The 1976-1978 EDU-TPLF war. The EDU's attack against the TPLF presents elements of a hegemonic bid – the former enjoyed overwhelming military superiority over the latter and the government forces were in disarray – but the two groups should *not* be considered coethnic; thus this instance of inter-rebel war amounts to a failed prediction of my theory.

Aware of the formidable, looming threat that the EDU posed, the TPLF approached the group's leadership in Sudan and proposed a modus vivendi between the two organizations, but Ras Mengesha refused.<sup>416</sup> In September 1976, the EDU launched an initial limited thrust into Tigray, which the TPLF managed to repel at a serious cost in terms of members' lives.<sup>417</sup> The following March, the new offensive was overwhelming: with around 10,000 well-armed men, the EDU rapidly took over the Ethiopian towns of Humera and Metema (just across the border with Sudan), which hosted army garrisons, and then moved into the TPLF's stronghold in western Tigray. The TPLF initially decided to hold its ground but its defensive lines were

---

<sup>416</sup> This account was provided to the author by Ghidey Zeratsion, who led the TPLF's diplomatic outreach. In interviews with the author Gebru Asrat and Sibhat Nega made similar observations (Sibhat Nega has been in the TPLF's leadership since 1975; he was interviewed on July 26 and 30, 2013, in Addis Ababa).

<sup>417</sup> Author's interviews with Ghidey Zeratsion and Sibhat Nega; Aregawi Berhe (2009, pp. 107-8) reports that the EDU's contingent consisted of 250 men. In the absence of direct evidence of the EDU's decision-making it is only possible to speculate on its motivation for launching this hastened attack, before the organization's full mobilization. It may have been prompted by the group's perception of the TPLF as a "bunch of students" that would be easily put back in their place (as several TPLF-related subjects suggested), the impulse to retaliate against the attack on Teranafit (many members of which joined the EDU) and the desire to interfere with TPLF's popular mobilization efforts in western Tigray.

eventually swept away by the EDU's swarms.<sup>418</sup> All TPLF-related sources stress the enormous losses experienced by the organization, which had to switch to a protracted warfare approach to survive, launching hit-and-run attacks while relinquishing the defense of fixed positions against superior firepower.<sup>419</sup> However, a major government counteroffensive on EDU's positions in June 1977, combined with gradual attrition of its forces through TPLF's guerrilla attacks, broke the EDU's back. By February 1978, the TPLF was engaged in mop-up operations in Tigray's countryside.<sup>420</sup>

Based on EDU's propaganda, mobilization efforts and the actual pattern of the offensive (as reported in the literature and in TPLF's accounts), there is little doubt about the broad outlines of the group's plan: the EDU expected to march triumphantly to Mekele (Tigray's capital) and then to Addis Ababa, rolling up on its way the TPLF, which it saw as little more than a nuisance.<sup>421</sup> With hindsight, the EDU optimistically miscalculated the ease of taking over the central government, but it correctly assessed its military superiority over the TPLF and the

---

<sup>418</sup> Aregawi Berhe 2009, pp. 109-11. Aregawi Berhe points out that the decision to try to openly withstand the EDU's onslaught was motivated by the TPLF's desire to be seen by Tigray's peasants as willing to put up a serious fight and pay a heavy cost: "Organizing a static defense was militarily wrong, but politically correct" (author's interview; Gebru Asrat made a similar observation).

<sup>419</sup> For example, according to Tedros Hagos, the TPLF lost half of its fighters (author's interview); Aregawi Berhe (2009, p. 111) reports the loss of a third of the group's fighters and three quarters of the guns.

<sup>420</sup> The government crushing defeat of the EDU is reported by Clapham (1990, p. 185). According to Nigatu Teferi (an officer in the Ethiopian army at that time), the government, alarmed by the fact that the EDU had reached the outskirts of Gondar, brought in units armed with heavy artillery from the Ogaden, which inflicted a debilitating blow on the rebel group; then the TPLF managed to finish the weakened EDU with guerrilla attacks (author's interview). TPLF-related sources acknowledge that the government attack on the EDU contributed to its demise but diverge on its importance compared to the TPLF's continuous harassment of EDU's units (some of my interviewees argue that both were important, while others claim that the TPLF's actions mattered more because by the time of the government offensive the TPLF had already weakened the EDU; by contrast, Tesfay Atsbeha points out that the TPLF's eventual success was made possible by the fact that the government offensive caused the fragmentation of EDU into small units more vulnerable to guerrilla attacks).

<sup>421</sup> Tareke 2009, p. 86.

fact that the government did not pose a serious and immediate threat. TPLF-related sources consistently stress that their group was completely outgunned<sup>422</sup> and that the government had very limited ability to project power in Tigray's countryside.<sup>423</sup> The EDU's crucial mistake, as Aregawi Berhe suggests, probably was failing to consolidate its hold on Tigray's countryside before heading further south, thus posing an immediate existential threat to the Derg, which reacted ferociously:

“We retreated to central Tigray. Instead of pursuing us they moved south towards the government forces. Had they pressed us we could not have posed a challenge. We had taken a lot of losses and we had little ammunition. Now the Derg had an opportunity to strike back and recapture lost territory.”<sup>424</sup>

Based on my definition, the EDU and the TPLF should not be considered coethnic, due to the former's pan-Ethiopian agenda and ethnically mixed composition. Unlike Teranafit, the EDU did not simply aim to take over Tigray, but was bent on using it as launch-pad for overthrowing the Derg in Addis Ababa. A large proportion of EDU's fighters were from Tigray, but the organization recruited also many individuals from other northern regions of Ethiopia and important leadership figures were not Tigrayan.<sup>425</sup> Thus this episode represents a deviation from the pattern of inter-rebel war predicted by my theory. But in a sense this is also an exception that

---

<sup>422</sup> According to Aregawi Berhe (2009, p. 109) and Tedros Hagos (author's interview), the EDU had a numerical superiority of 10 to 1; all other TPLF-related sources confirm a stark imbalance of power in terms of troop numbers and armaments.

<sup>423</sup> As, for example, Gebru Asrat notes, “the Derg was not strong at that time; it had basically lost control of rural areas in western Tigray, from Humera to Shire” (author's interview).

<sup>424</sup> Author's interview. Tesfay Atsbeha made a similar observation (author's interview).

<sup>425</sup> Aregawi Berhe 2009, pp. 108-9.

confirms the rule: the groups do not fit my definition of coethnicity, but they competed over an overlapping pool of potential supporters – the dynamic which the abstract concept is supposed to capture. This fact is acknowledged by TPLF’s sources. For example, in discussing the reasons for the EDU’s ultimate failure, Tesfay Atsbeha observes that the “EDU was going for the towns, but this was a mistake: it should have controlled the countryside. The peasants would have flocked to their side. Even the TPLF militias had switched sides.”<sup>426</sup> The EDU’s ability to appeal to Tigray’s peasants depended on the absence, in practice, of a sharp distinction between it and its “precursor” – Teranafit. As noted, EDU’s founder and prominent (but not sole) leader – Ras Mengesha – was the powerful Tigrayan symbol that had inspired the creation of Teranafit. Moreover, after its defeat at the TPLF’s hands, a large segment of Teranafit’s forces joined the EDU, where they “remained as an autonomous contingent, poised to grab Tigray.”<sup>427</sup>

In sum, although I lack access to EDU’s sources, some elements of window of opportunity logic seem to be present in this episode of inter-rebel war. The EDU was stronger than the TPLF and the government represented only a limited threat. However, the two groups do not meet my definition of coethnicity, even if the available evidence suggests that they had largely overlapping bases of support.

*The 1978 attack by the TPLF against the EPRP.* The 1978 TPLF’s attack against the EPRP represents an additional case of hegemonic bid, as the former attacked its weaker coethnic rival in a moment in which the government and the EDU did not pose a serious and immediate military threat.

---

<sup>426</sup> Author’s interview. Aregawi Berhe (2009, p. 94) makes a relevant observation too: “Had the TPLF failed to fill this gap, likely another local force, for example the TLF or *Teranafit*/EDU, would have become the leading organization in Tigray given the readiness of the people to take matters into their own hands.”

<sup>427</sup> Aregawi Berhe 2009, p. 107.

From the moment in which the two organizations established a military presence in eastern Tigray in late 1975 until their fight in the spring of 1978, TPLF-EPRP relations were tense, due to ideological disagreements and animated competition for the support of Tigray's peasants. The TPLF and the EPRP engaged in nine rounds of negotiations to establish some form of cooperation in their anti-government struggle and prevent the escalation of skirmishes involving fighters, militias and supporters of the two groups.<sup>428</sup>

Until the spring of 1978, no window of opportunity or vulnerability emerged; consistent with my argument, no inter-rebel war occurred. Throughout this period, the government had very limited ability to project power in rural Tigray, but the TPLF faced the threat of Teranafit and the EDU in its base area in the west of the province. However, the picture changed in the spring of 1978. By then, while the EPRP's forces in eastern Tigray had languished amidst internal turmoil and lack of any significant military engagement with the Derg, the TPLF had defeated its rivals in the west, acquiring in the process much valuable battlefield experience and weapons.

The TPLF took advantage of a clear opportunity to establish a hegemonic position in the province by attacking its weaker rival's base area in eastern Tigray in mid-March 1978.<sup>429</sup>

---

<sup>428</sup> Kiflu Tadesse 1998, pp. 88 and 390-9; Aregawi Berhe 2009, pp. 143-7; author's interview with Ghidey Zeratsion, who took part as a TPLF's representative to the negotiations. Several possible arrangements were discussed, ranging from the merge of the two groups to peaceful coexistence in the context of parallel struggles against the Derg. The TPLF and the EPRP created a "Coordinating Committee" to manage localized disputes, such as episodes of harassment by fighters of one group of supporters of the other and occasional skirmishes (sometimes lethal) between fighters.

<sup>429</sup> The EPRP may have perceived the existence of a mounting threat, as the stronger TPLF would be in a position of focusing its full attention on the EPRP as the fight with the EDU drew to a conclusion. However, as discussed in Chapter 2, we should not expect the EPRP to gamble for resurrection as its military weakness was a function of limited battlefield experience and problems of internal cohesion. In this kind of scenario, the group's leadership would focus on addressing the sources of the weakness – adopting measures to enhance battlefield experience and/or solidify its control over the organization – rather than pick a difficult fight with a stronger group. The leaders of an organization rocked by internal dissension typically would have little confidence of being able to execute a coherent military plan, which would be necessary to have even a minimum chance of victory against a stronger rival. In addition, advocating a dangerous course of action (as a gamble for resurrection is) could weaken the embattled leadership by strengthening dissidents' accusations of recklessness or incompetence.



Within a few weeks, the decimated EPRP's forces took refuge in ELF-controlled territory in Eritrea.<sup>430</sup> After six months, the surviving EPRP's units managed to join the group's contingent in the northwestern province of Gondar; in mid-1979, with the help of the ELF, the group established a presence in Wolkait – an area of Gondar that the TPLF intended to control because it offered direct access to Sudanese territory and was inhabited by Tigrigna speaking people. In late 1979 the TPLF attacked and expelled its rival from the area. From then on, the EPRP was relegated to an inconsequential role in the armed struggle and could only operate in areas of Gondar and Wello provinces far from Tigray.<sup>431</sup>

TPLF- and EPRP-related sources agree that the TPLF was militarily stronger when war broke out. Aregawi Berhe summarizes well the general perception of the EPRP among the TPLF's leadership:

“We considered them [the EPRP] militarily ineffective. There was a lot of rhetoric on their part, but just that. They had no military experience, unlike us. We had fought against Teranafit and EDU for a long time. We had also fought the Derg, even if not in major battles. In this regard we understood we were in a better position than the EPRP if war broke out.”<sup>432</sup>

The two organizations had roughly comparable numbers of fighters and levels of armaments, but the TPLF was clearly superior in terms of internal cohesion, discipline and

---

<sup>430</sup> Kiflu Tadesse 1998, pp. 402-7; Aregawi Berhe 2009, pp. 148-9. Kiflu Tadesse reports that the EPRP lost about half of its 1,000 members.

<sup>431</sup> Kiflu Tadesse 1998, pp. 434-7 and 471; Aregawi Berhe 2009, pp. 149-51.

<sup>432</sup> Author's interview. Consistently, Kahsay Berhe (2005, p. 58), Ghidey Zeratsion and Mokonnen Mokonnen (author's interviews) stressed that the TPLF emerged battle-hardened from its fight against the EDU.

fighting skills.<sup>433</sup> As former TPLF's leader Gebru Asrat notes, "[t]he war with EDU was almost finished by January [1978]. The TPLF had come out strong. We believed we were much stronger than the EPRP. We despised them because they were not engaged in any fighting. They were not fighting the Derg as they had a coup strategy... We perceived we could easily win."<sup>434</sup> In addition to lacking significant battlefield experience, the EPRP was riven by major problems of internal cohesion, provoked by the arrival to the group's base area of large number of activists from the cities, who vehemently criticized the authority of the group's military leadership.<sup>435</sup> As Aregawi Berhe makes clear in answering my question about whether his group had intelligence on the EPRP's internal problems, the TPLF was fully aware of them: "We knew what was going on. All organizations have intelligence. We knew about the factions inside EPRP, their military situation, in the cities and in the countryside. Only after all these assessments we decided to fight them."<sup>436</sup>

---

<sup>433</sup> Kiflu Tadesse (1998, p. 404) reports that in early 1978 the EPRP had about 1,000 fighters in eastern Tigray; in an interview with the author, Begasho Ashenafi also estimated the size of the EPRP at about 1,000 men. Aregawi Berhe (2009, p. 178) reports that in the late spring of 1978 the TPLF could marshal eight companies for an overall size of about 1,000 fighters; Tesfay Atsbeha, a TPLF military commander at that time, notes that the two groups were equal in terms of numbers and weapons, but the TPLF was stronger as significantly more experienced (author's interviews). In partial contrast, Tedros Hagos recalls that the TPLF was markedly stronger due to its fighting experience but had a smaller force (author's interview).

<sup>434</sup> Author's interview. The gap in military experience between the two groups clearly emerges in most interviews with TPLF-related subjects (e.g., Mokonnen Mokonnen and Tekleweini Assefa). The EPRP's problems of combat readiness and its limited military operations against the government (often a source of discontent among the organization's rank-and-file) is a leitmotiv in EPRP's leader Kiflu Tadesse's account (1998, pp. 188, 370, 374 and 381). In interviews with the author, Begasho Ashenafi and an anonymous EPRP's foot soldier also stressed the group's almost complete lack of battlefield experience at the moment of the inter-rebel war (the latter was interviewed on July 21 and August 3, 2013, in Addis Ababa).

<sup>435</sup> Kiflu Tadesse 1998, pp. 374-83.

<sup>436</sup> In the course of 1977, the government almost completely eradicated the EPRP's urban infrastructure; hundreds of militants took refuge in the group's base area in eastern Tigray (Kiflu Tadesse 1998, pp. 269-301 and 308-9).

As with the other episodes of inter-rebel war in Tigray, the government posed only a limited threat. In the words of Aregawi Berhe:

“Our assessment was that the government was weak in Tigray. They could not penetrate rural areas; they had limited forces; they would not dare going to the countryside.

Tigray’s terrain is very rough and mountainous. It is unsuitable for conventional warfare. Tanks, big guns and airplanes can’t do much there. The Derg could not penetrate rural areas at will; attempts at penetration would come with a great cost for the Derg. Probably also at that point in time the Derg’s attention was mostly focused on the Eritreans. They had most of their forces there and in Tigray they were mostly watching the fight between TPLF and EPRP, the way they had done with Teranafit. So there was no intervention, not even attempts at intervention.”<sup>437</sup>

My coding of the EPRP and the TPLF as coethnic rebel groups requires explanation, given that the former is typically labeled as pan-Ethiopian while the TPLF explicitly espoused Tigrayan nationalism. In fact, disagreements about the importance of the Ethiopia’s “national question” were at the root of the bitter ideological debates between the two organizations. However, these ideological differences are not sufficient to conclude that the EPRP was not a Tigrayan organization. As noted above, its program emphasized the need to end the oppression of ethnic groups by the Amhara-dominated central government, including Tigrayans. The difference from the TPLF’s position was about whether the class contradiction or the national/ethnic contradiction had primacy: for the EPRP, the class contradiction was paramount

---

<sup>437</sup> Author’s interviews. In response to my question about the TPLF’s threat perception vis-à-vis the government at the moment in which the fight with the EPRP occurred, Gebru Asrat noted that “the government was engaged in war against Somalia, we knew that. The government was busy there.” Tekleweini Assefa reports that after a “holistic assessment” of the military situation, the TPLF leadership concluded that the government would not intervene during the fight with the EPRP and that it would in fact be happy to see them fight each other (author’s interview).

and addressing it would automatically lead to a solution of the national contradiction; for the TPLF, which also adopted a Marxist-Leninist ideology, under Tigray's conditions at that time the national contradiction had to take priority and solving it would then lead to the solution of the class contradiction.<sup>438</sup> Thus in programmatic terms the EPRP can be coded as Tigrayan because it advanced claims about the improvement of Tigrayans' fate (as well as that of other ethnic groups). The EPRP also meets the other element of my definition because the bulk of its leadership was from Tigray.<sup>439</sup> The fact that the two groups had overlapping bases of support is clearly illustrated by the dynamics of competition between them, which are reported by TPLF- and EPRP-related sources: both groups were able to recruit in eastern Tigray, with some villages siding with the TPLF and some with the EPRP and the two organizations trying hard to convince supporters of their rivals to switch sides.<sup>440</sup> Consistent with my argument, after the TPLF got rid of its rival, the former managed to expand its influence in areas previously under the EPRP's influence and intensify its mobilization efforts of Tigray's population.<sup>441</sup> As Aregawi Berhe notes, having established its hegemonic position in Tigray, the TPLF took over "[p]eople's associations that had been previously constituted in some form by the EDU and the EPRP."<sup>442</sup>

---

<sup>438</sup> Kiflu Tadesse 1998, pp. 390-1; Aregawi Berhe 2009, pp. 142-5.

<sup>439</sup> I do not have figures on the ethnic background of EPRP's fighters; those active in Tigray are likely to have been predominantly Tigrayan until major inflows of people from the cities in the first half of 1977. The literature and EPRP- and TPLF-related subjects report that the group's leadership was dominated by Tigrayans (Sarah Vaughan 2003, p. 166; author's interviews with Begasho Ashenafi and Tekleweini Assefa).

<sup>440</sup> Kiflu Tadesse 1998, p. 394; Kahsay Berhe 2005, p. 75; Aregawi Berhe 2009, p. 146.

<sup>441</sup> Kiflu Tadesse 1998, p. 407; Kahsay Berhe 2005, pp. 75-6; Solomon Barnabas, *State Change & Continuity in Ethiopia*, Addis Ababa: Afro-Arab Strategic Consultancy, 2012, p. 30.

In sum, the TPFL's behavior towards the EPRP is well explained by window of opportunity logic. The two coethnic rebel groups intensely competed for the support of Tigray's peasants from the beginning; however, the TPLF turned on its weaker rival only in 1978, after it had dealt with the EDU and in a context of continuing limited government threat. As the newly established rebel hegemon, the TPLF solidified its grip on the province's population.

***The dog that did not bark (much): the prevalence of inter-ethnic rebel peace***

While both the Eritrean and Tigrayan insurgent movements experienced several episodes of infighting, relations between rebel groups across the Tigray-Eritrea ethno-national divide were characterized by a remarkable absence of large-scale violence, with the important exception of the clashes between the ELF and the TPLF.

Rather than trying to nip in the bud the rebel groups mushrooming in neighboring Tigray in 1975-1976, the Eritrean fronts provided vital help. The EPLF trained and armed both the TPLF and the EPRP, while the ELF provided similar support to the TLF.<sup>443</sup> Moreover, in various occasions Tigrayan and Eritrean organizations coordinated their forces to fend off government offensives.<sup>444</sup> To be sure, relations between Eritrean and Tigrayan groups were not always harmonious; mutual suspicion, fear of exploitation and abandonment, tough bargaining and

---

<sup>442</sup> Aregawi Berhe 2009, p. 281.

<sup>443</sup> Kahsay Berhe 2005, pp. 49-52; Aregawi 2009, pp. 251-5; Weldemichael 2014. John Young ("The Tigray and Eritrean Peoples Liberation Fronts: A History of Tensions and Pragmatism," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 34 (1), 1996b: 105-20, in particular p. 106) and Weldemichael (2014, p. 92) report that the ELF had an alliance with the EDU; however, ELF's chairman Ahmed Nasser claimed that the two groups' ideological positions were too far apart for a systematic relationship but acknowledged they cooperated in a battle against government forces in 1977 (author's interview). The EPLF also provided support to the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) in the southwest of Ethiopia.

<sup>444</sup> John Young 1996b; Gebru Tareke, "From Lash to Red Star: the Pitfalls of Counter-insurgency in Ethiopia, 1980-82," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 40 (3), 2002: 465-98; Aregawi Berhe 2009, pp. 141-6 and 216-7.

arms-twisting were pervasive, as their interests were far from perfectly aligned.<sup>445</sup> However, the large-scale violence that characterized intra-ethnic relations was a rare occurrence across the Tigray-Eritrea divide. This point is well illustrated by TPLF-EPLF relations, to which I now turn.

After consolidation of their hegemonic positions in the respective rebel movements, the relationship between the two groups turned sour. The TPLF started objecting to the static, conventional defense of the EPLF's base areas in the Sahel against government offensives after 1982 (which would require the deployment of TPLF's supporting units), advocating instead a more mobile guerrilla strategy. In addition, the EPLF resisted the TPLF's pressure to condemn the Soviet Union – the main international backer of the Derg regime – as “social imperialist”; this was not a purely abstract ideological dispute as the TPLF feared that through Soviet mediation the EPLF might reach a separate deal with the government, which would leave the TPLF in a vulnerable position. Most crucially, the two groups disagreed on the appropriate solution for Ethiopia's “national question.”<sup>446</sup> For a long time, the TPLF maintained an ambiguous position about whether Tigrayans' grievances could be addressed within the framework of a truly democratic Ethiopia or secession would be necessary, and whether the group's war aims should be limited to the liberation of Tigray or extend to the take-over of power in Addis Ababa. By contrast, as Awet Weldemichael notes,

“[b]ecause Eritrea needed a favorable replacement at the helm in Addis Ababa to help legitimize its independence after a battlefield victory, the EPLF opposed Ethiopian

---

<sup>445</sup> For an excellent analysis of these relations, see Weldemichael 2014; see also Young 1996b.

<sup>446</sup> Young 1996b; Weldemichael 2014; author's interviews with Mesfin Hagos, Ghidey Zeratsion and Aregawi Berhe. The TPLF-related subjects point out that fear of an EPLF-Derg rapprochement at the TPLF's expenses was not a crucial factor in the dispute between the two rebel groups, as the TPLF's leadership calculated that the Eritreans' contacts with the government were unlikely to lead to an agreement given the distance between their positions.

groups that aspired to secede. Potential secession of its Ethiopian allies threatened to deprive Eritrea of a friendly regime in Addis Ababa. Worse still from the Eritrean standpoint, its allies' championing of secession weakened Eritrean claims to separate statehood based on a pillar of the OAU [Organization of African Unity] that sanctified colonialism's territorial legacy... [T]he EPLF continued to insist that, without reneging on Eritrea's uniqueness and right to independence, Tigrayan insurgents should take on a pan-Ethiopian mandate, seeing themselves as potential rulers of a multiethnic Ethiopia and not just a breakaway Tigray mini-state."<sup>447</sup>

In 1985 eventually tensions came to a head, with the two groups engaging in public recriminations through radio broadcasts and rebel publications.<sup>448</sup> The TPLF went as far as calling the EPLF "enemy of the revolution," which prompted the EPLF to sever all contacts with its Tigrayan counterpart and even deny it access to Sudan through Eritrean territory to deliver relief to victims of the famine ravaging Tigray.<sup>449</sup> Relations between the groups remained strained for the following three years, until a clear opportunity emerged in the spring of 1988 to inflict a decisive defeat on the Derg with a coordinated EPLF-TPLF effort. The TPLF then, in a nod to the EPLF's longstanding position, publicly stated that regime change in Addis Ababa was

---

<sup>447</sup> Weldemichael 2014, pp. 88 and 96.

<sup>448</sup> *People's Voice*, March 1985, April-May 1985, Special Issue ("On Our Differences with the EPLF"), 1986 (published by the TPLF Foreign Relations Bureau, consulted at the archives of the TPLF's Martyrs Memorial, Mekele, Ethiopia).

<sup>449</sup> Weldemichael 2014, pp. 103-4.

a prerequisite for peace and for any act of national self-determination to take place, which led to the resumption of joint operations and ultimately rebel military victory in 1991.<sup>450</sup>

Notwithstanding the intense acrimony between the TPLF and the EPLF in 1985-88 and the opportunity for military confrontation provided by the physical proximity of their base areas, no large-scale fighting ensued. Consistent with my argument, there is no indication that the EPLF's leadership ever thought it could just defeat the TPLF and then mobilize Tigray's population the way it had done with the ELF and the Eritrea's lowlanders. To the contrary, the EPLF continued to believe that the defeat of the regime in Addis Ababa could only be achieved with a multi-ethnic alliance of Ethiopia's rebel groups; as EPLF's military leader Mesfin Hagos noted, "we were aware of our interdependence with the TPLF. We knew that the enemy wanted to destroy one at the time and that we would be the next target if it defeated the TPLF."<sup>451</sup>

The TPLF followed a similar multi-ethnic coalition approach as the EPLF's to move beyond Tigrayan territory and take over power in Addis Ababa: it "groomed" the Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (EPDM) and the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO), with the objective of mobilizing Amhara and Oromo populations, and then brought them together in the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in 1989.<sup>452</sup>

---

<sup>450</sup> Several factors likely contributed to the groups' perception of an opportunity of military victory, in particular the March 1988 major EPLF's offensive in the Sahel, which broke the government's ten year-old siege, the waning support for Ethiopia of a retrenching Soviet Union and the Derg regime's internal weakness (Weldemichael 2014, pp. 106-8; Aregawi Berhe 2009, pp. 272-3 and 315; author's interviews with Aregawi Berhe, Mesfin Hagos and Haile Menkerios).

<sup>451</sup> Author's interview. The absence of fighting between the EPLF and the TPLF in the years of their diplomatic breakup may be overdetermined as the balance of power might have been sufficiently close (albeit likely favorable to the more experienced and better armed EPLF) not to warrant all-out war, even if during that period the government's ability to project power was clearly more limited than in the past (in interviews with the author, Mesfin Hagos and Haile Menkerios described the military situation in Eritrea as a stalemate/lull).

<sup>452</sup> The EPDM was formed by elements of the EPRP that reached out to the TPLF after the defeat of their group to continue the struggle against the Derg. Initially, the organization was formally pan-Ethiopian but the TPLF used it to



The TPLF also cooperated with the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), which had a strong presence in Oromia. Consistent with my argument, notwithstanding the tensions and mistrust that marked the relations between TPLF/EPRDF and OLF, no fighting ensued until after the Derg's defeat, when TPLF forces cracked down on the OLF as the latter left the transitional government adducing irregularities in regional elections and intimidation, and geared up to resume armed resistance.<sup>453</sup>

The constraints posed by ethnicity to the TPLF's anti-government struggle were not limited to the fact that the rebel group could not directly appeal to and recruit from non-Tigrayan populations. Tigrayan fighters themselves objected to fighting outside Tigray and thus started abandoning the battlefield to return home in 1989, arguing that as their goal of liberating Tigray had been achieved, it was now up to the other peoples of Ethiopia to free their territories. Only after a long internal debate, did the TPLF's rank-and-file accept the need to completely defeat the Derg regime for Tigray to achieve lasting peace and self-determination.<sup>454</sup>

As noted, the fight between the TPLF and the ELF does not fit my argument. Besides occasional skirmishes related to TPLF's claims on some ELF-held border territories and ELF's attempts to continue to administer the affairs of Eritreans living in TPLF-controlled areas, major

---

mobilize the Amhara populations in Gondar and Wollo (Aregawi Berhe 2009, p. 323; author's interviews with Aregawi Berhe, Ghidey Zeratsion, Gebru Asrat and Tekleweini Assefa); it then openly took on an ethnic mantle by becoming the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM) in 1991 (Tareke 2009, p. 109). The EPRDF also included the Ethiopian Democratic Officers' Revolutionary Movement (EDORM); the organization, without a specific ethnic profile and composed of officials of the Ethiopian army captured by the TPLF, was disbanded after victory against the Derg (Vaughan 2003, p. 168).

<sup>453</sup> Marina Ottaway, "The Ethiopian Transition: Democratization or New Authoritarianism?" *Northeast African Studies* 2 (3), 1995: 67-87; Young 1997, pp. 107-8; Vaughan 2003, pp. 31, 178-9 and 217; author's interviews with Mulugeta Gebrehiwot and Negasso Gitata (interviewed on July 29, 2013, in Addis Ababa; before he joined the OPDM in 1991, Negasso Gitata was an OLF's member; he was President of Ethiopia from 1995 to 2001 and at the time of the interview he was involved in opposition politics).

<sup>454</sup> Young 1996b, p. 109-10. Weldemichael (2014, p. 109) reports that 30,000 TPLF's fighters deserted in this episode.

clashes between the two groups occurred in 1979-81: in the fall of 1979 and the spring 1980, the TPLF fought ELF's contingents trying to escort EPRP's elements into Wolkait through TPLF-held territory, and in 1980-81 the TPLF took part (on the EPLF's side) in the intra-Eritrean rebel war. A closer look at these episodes, however, reveals mechanisms that, albeit not part of my argument, are consistent with its "spirit;" the TPLF-ELF fight thus represents less of a fatal falsification blow than if dynamics similar to those that characterize cases of intra-ethnic war, which are explicitly ruled out by my theory, were in evidence.

The TPLF-ELF battles in which the EPRP was also involved occurred in the context of the TPLF's war against the EPRP. Bereft of allies in Tigray (as the TPLF had wiped out its local partner – the TLF – and had gotten closer to the EPLF), the ELF tried to prop up the EPRP after its first beating at the hands of the TPLF in 1978. The evidence on ELF's decision-making is limited, but it seems that it intended to escort and arm EPRP's surviving elements to Gondar, where they would reunite with group's units there and then organize activities in Wolkait, to the west of the TPLF's base area, rather than directly attacking the TPLF (at least not immediately).<sup>455</sup> The TPLF was alarmed by the prospect of the strengthening of its rival in Tigray and thus, when its forces bumped into the ELF-EPRP contingent in the fall of 1979, a battle ensued. Similarly, in the spring of 1980 the TPLF clashed with an ELF's contingent escorting EPRP's elements expelled by the TPLF from Wolkait.<sup>456</sup>

---

<sup>455</sup> Ahmed Nasser claims that the battle was unplanned (author's interview), which appears plausible given that only a relatively small ELF's contingent was involved (Aregawi Berhe 2009, p. 257).

<sup>456</sup> Kiflu Tadesse 1998, pp. 436-7; Aregawi Berhe (2009, p. 257-8).

**Table 4.1: Summary of the findings of the insurgencies in Tigray and Eritrea**

<b>Observed outcome</b> (inter-rebel war/peaceful coexistence)	<b>Windows theory prediction</b>
<b><u>Intra-Eritrean</u></b>	
ELF vs. ELM, 1965	✓(window of opportunity)
ELF vs. EPLF, 1972-74	✓(window of opportunity)
ELF & EPLF coexist, 1975-79	✓(no window)
ELF vs. ELF-PLF, 1978	✓(window of opportunity)
EPLF vs. ELF, 1980-81	✓(window of opportunity)
<b><u>Intra-Tigrayan</u></b>	
TPLF vs. TLF, 1975	✓(window of opportunity)
TPLF vs. Teranafit, 1976	✓(window of opp. & vuln.)
TPLF & EPRP coexist, 1975-77	✓(no window)
TPLF vs. EPRP, 1978-79	✓(window of opportunity)
<b><u>Inter-ethnic</u></b>	
TPLF & EDU, 1976-78*	✗(no window)
ELF & TPLF coexist, 1975-78	✓(no window)
TPLF & EPLF coexist	✓(no window)
ELF & Teranafit coexist	✓(no window)
ELF & EDU coexist	✓(no window)
TPLF & EPDM coexist	✓(no window)
TPLF vs. ELF, 1979-81	✗(no window)

*Note:* The units of analysis are dyadic interactions (coded dichotomously as “war” or “coexistence”) involving rebel groups that operated in adjacent areas, i.e., dyads whose members could not have fought each other due to geographical distance are excluded.

\* The TPLF-EDU dyad is an ambiguous case. I do not code the EDU as Tigrayan due to its lack of an ethnic agenda and its ethnically mixed membership. However, the EDU could recruit Tigray’s peasants (due to the fact that its founder was a very popular Tigrayan notable and the absorption in its ranks of the remnants of the Tigrayan Teranafit); the TPLF and the EDU thus found themselves competing for the same pool of resources as coethnic rebel groups tend to do, and fought each other.

After these battles, in early 1981 the TPLF eagerly accepted the EPLF's proposal to join it in its ongoing all-out offensive against the ELF.<sup>457</sup> As Gebru Asrat notes, "there was sort of a transmission of the intra-Eritrean conflict in Ethiopia through this system of alliances" – a mirror image of the earlier ELF's entanglement in the TPLF-EPRP feud.<sup>458</sup> The TPLF wanted to get rid of an organization that had threatened its interests in Tigray but there is no indication that it expected to take over the resources previously under ELF's control, as in instances of intra-ethnic war. In fact, the driving TPLF's concern in contributing to push the ELF out of Eritrea was the survival of the EPLF rather than the absorption of ELF's resources. Having noted that the ELF could hinder EPLF's defensive efforts against the massive Derg offensive then under preparation (the Red Star) and thus bring about a government military victory, Tedros Hagos succinctly put the TPLF's rationale for fighting side by side with its Eritrean ally against the ELF: "The collapse of the Eritrean revolution was not going to have a pleasant effect on our [i.e. Tigrayan] self-interests."<sup>459</sup> The implied counterfactual here is that the TPLF likely would not have launched a large-scale attack to expel the ELF from Eritrea had there not been another Eritrean organization ready to fill the vacuum. While providing supporting process evidence is exceedingly hard, given that rebel decision-makers tend not to indulge in "parallel universes" type of thinking, the relations between TPLF and EPLF in the aftermath of the ELF's defeat represents a helpful comparison: notwithstanding the high tensions between the two groups discussed above, they refrained from fighting each other. In fact, the TPLF continued to be deeply interested in the survival of its Eritrean counterpart, as the alternative would not have

---

<sup>457</sup> Aregawi Berhe 2009, p. 259.

<sup>458</sup> Author's interview.

<sup>459</sup> Quoted in Alemseged Abbay 1998, p. 114.

been the take-over by the TPLF of the insurgency in Eritrea, but rather an opportunity for the Derg to focus its full resources on the Tigrayan insurgents.<sup>460</sup>

## **6. Alternative explanations and endogeneity**

In this section, I discuss alternative explanations for inter-rebel war in Eritrea and Tigray and address potential concerns about endogeneity. Fotini Christia's theory represents the most well-established alternative argument, emphasizing a different power-driven logic (minimum winning coalition, MWC) and downplaying the role of coethnicity.<sup>461</sup> MWC logic would expect inter-rebel war to occur when one rebel group (or a rebel coalition) is sufficiently strong to take on both the government and other rebels. The available evidence does not provide much support to MWC theory, which wrongly predicts inter-rebel cooperation in all instances of inter-rebel war in Eritrea and Tigray (with the possible exception of the episode involving the EDU), as the rebel groups were much weaker than the government in terms of troop numbers and armaments and had very little territorial control.

In 1965, when the ELF wiped out the ELM, the insurgents could conduct hit-and-run operations in large swaths of Eritrea, but did not control any territory.<sup>462</sup> As noted, Ethiopian forces in Eritrea outnumbered the insurgents 3 to 1 (the ratio would be much more favorable to the government if the entirety of Ethiopian armed forces – about 40,000 men – were included

---

<sup>460</sup> As Mokonnen Mokonnen notes, “we [the TPLF] wanted the EPLF to stay in power otherwise the Derg would focus all its forces on us” (author’s interview). In the mid-1980s, the TPLF did provide some support to two ELF’s splinters – the Democratic Movement for the Liberation of Eritrea (DMLE) and the ELF-Revolutionary Council; this proved a further irritant in TPLF-EPLF relations, but the two organizations played no role in the anti-government struggle as they had a negligible presence in Eritrea (Young 1996b, p. 116; Weldemichael 2014, p. 103).

<sup>461</sup> Fotini Christia, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>462</sup> Woldemariam 2011, p. 104; author’s interview with Mesfin Hagos and with Gime Ahmed.

rather than just the brigade deployed in Eritrea) and were more heavily armed.<sup>463</sup> When the ELF attacked its splinters in 1972, the government-rebel balance of power was roughly comparable to the one prevailing in 1965 in terms of territorial control, troop numbers and weaponry.<sup>464</sup> As Michael Woldemariam notes, in summarizing battlefield dynamics in Eritrea in 1972, “the position of the Ethiopian military in the province was simply too strong to be challenged. Backed by their erstwhile American and Israeli supporters, the chance that the Ethiopian military would incur significant losses at the hands of an increasingly bold but outgunned band of rebels was remote.”<sup>465</sup> Similarly, the government controlled the bulk of Eritrean territory and its forces outnumbered and outgunned the rebels by even wider margins in 1978 (when the ELF crushed the ELF-PLF) and in 1980-1981 (when the EPLF pushed the ELF out of Eritrea).

By contrast, MWC correctly predicts (as my argument does) the absence of inter-rebel war in Eritrea in 1978-79, when a reinvigorated Ethiopian army regained control of the province and launched a series of major offensives to crush the insurgents.<sup>466</sup> Moreover, MWC correctly

---

<sup>463</sup> While the insurgents were lightly armed, the Ethiopian forces benefited from heavier military equipment and training provided by the United States; Jeffrey Alan Lefebvre, *Arms for the Horn: U.S. Security Policy in Ethiopia and Somalia, 1953-1991* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991), pp. 109-10 and 116.

<sup>464</sup> Woldemariam 2011, pp. 104, 111-12 and 137; Weldemichael 2013a, pp. 119-25. The Ethiopian army had still about 40,000 troops, while the ELF commanded 2,000 fighters (The Military Balance, London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1971-1972). I do not have precise information on the number of Ethiopian government forces deployed in Eritrea in 1972; in previous offensives two brigades from neighboring provinces had reinforced the brigade – the Twelfth – of the Second Division originally deployed in Eritrea, but it is not clear if those extra brigades were in Eritrea at the time of the onset of inter-rebel war. If only the Twelfth brigade and the battalion of “commandos” are counted, the government forces would have had a 2-1 advantage in terms of troop numbers over the ELF.

<sup>465</sup> Woldemariam 2015 p. 13.

<sup>466</sup> By 1979 the government controlled well over 70 percent of Eritrean territory and the army had grown to over 200,000 troops, with 120,000 deployed in Eritrea; both the ELF and the EPLF had 10 brigades, of 1,100-1,300 fighters each (Weldemichael 2009, pp. 1237-8; Dan Connell reports a higher figure of 40-50,000 Eritrean fighters; “Eritrean Struggle Nears Turning Point,” *The Guardian*, 24 May, 1978). MWC, however, does not necessarily explain the absence of inter-rebel war in Eritrea in 1975-77. Over this period, the ELF and the EPLF were growing

predicts the absence of war between the EPLF and the TPLF after the two groups established their hegemonic positions in the respective rebel movements, given that they were dwarfed by the government forces for a long time.<sup>467</sup> However, MWC cannot explain why the rebels continued to cooperate (rather than turning their guns against each other) past the point where a government defeat appeared a forgone conclusion.<sup>468</sup>

MWC's explanatory power is comparably limited in Tigray. In 1975, when the TPLF wiped out the TLF, the two organizations combined had less than 200 fighters and controlled no territory.<sup>469</sup> Similarly, at the time of their fight in 1976, Teranafit and TPLF were lightly armed, controlled no territory and had roughly 1,000 fighters each, compared to overall Derg's forces estimated at 45,000.<sup>470</sup> A balance of power even more favorable to the government prevailed in the spring of 1978, when the EPRP and the TPLF fought each other: the rebels had about 1,000 fighters each and mostly executed hit-and-run attacks, actually controlling little territory, while the Derg's forces had significantly expanded in numbers and firepower due to massive support

---

stronger relative to the government (as suggested by the rapid expansion of territory under exclusive insurgent control and the swelling of rebel ranks). MWC would lead us to expect an increased risk of inter-rebel war if the MWC threshold was passed (and one group was thus stronger than the government); otherwise, MWC would predict (this time correctly) inter-rebel peace. I do not have precise information on territorial control in late 1974 (when the rebels reached a ceasefire), but the MWC threshold in terms of territorial control in Eritrea was probably passed only in 1977 (when the rebels controlled 90 percent of the province's territory). By that time, the insurgents also outnumbered government forces deployed in Eritrea (Woldemariam 2011, pp. 116, 154 and 220).

<sup>467</sup> In the course of the 1982 Red Star offensive, the Derg deployed 136,000 heavily armed troops against 20,000 EPLF's fighters and about 6,000 TPLF's troops (Young 1997, p. 125; Tareke 2009, p. 229); the insurgents operated in large swaths of Tigray and Eritrea but held no territory apart from the EPLF's besieged base area in the Sahel.

<sup>468</sup> It is hard to tell exactly when the MWC threshold was passed. In terms of territorial control, by early 1989 the TPLF had complete control of Tigray and was poised to bring the fight to the Amhara heartlands, while Derg forces held out in a handful of urban centers in Eritrea under EPLF's siege; even then the government probably maintained a substantial superiority in terms of troop numbers and weaponry (Gebre Tareke 2009, pp. 46, 284 and 299; Aregawi Berhe 2009, pp. 184-5).

<sup>469</sup> Aregawi Berhe 2009, pp. 100 and 170.

<sup>470</sup> Young 1997, p. 98.

from the Soviet bloc. By contrast, when it attacked the TPLF, the EDU likely calculated to be stronger than the Derg, as it expected to rapidly march to Addis Ababa; thus this episode of inter-rebel war would be consistent with MWC, if power is measured in perceptual (or anticipated terms) rather in terms of actual territorial control (none, before the group crossed into Tigray from Sudan) and troop numbers (only 10,000).

A distinct set of alternative explanations focuses on rebel groups' characteristics (such as ideology and the degree of centralization) and individual rebel leaders' attributes (their temperament, world views and mental health, for example). These alternative explanations do not shed much light on inter-rebel war either. In the Eritrean camp, the EPLF had a more straightforward Marxist-Leninist orientation than the ELF, where a communist core (the Labor Party) competed with more conservative elements, tied to the Arab world and the Syrian and Iraqi Baath parties. These ideological differences cannot explain the pattern of alternation of cooperation and violent conflict, given that they were relatively stable features of the organizations.<sup>471</sup> In Tigray, the TPLF fought the conservative Teranafit and EDU as well as groups with which it shared a Marxist-Leninist outlook (the EPRP) and nationalist aspirations (the TLF).

Another version of the ideological argument would focus on the distinction between hardliners and moderates with regard to rebels' nationalist goals as the source of tensions that may escalate to inter-rebel war. This too is empirically unconvincing. The ELF and the EPLF occasionally engaged in separate negotiations with the government; these fostered mutual mistrust but did not reflect deep disagreements about nationalist goals, as the two organizations

---

<sup>471</sup> Interview with Haile Wold'ensae in Connell 2005, pp. 25-65; Awet T. Weldemichael, "African Diplomacy of Liberation: The Case of Eritrea's Search for An 'African India'," *Cahiers d'Études africaines* 212 (4), 2013b: 867-94 (in particular p. 876); interviews with Gime Ahmed, conducted by Günter Schröder, 3 October, 1987 and 29 May, 1988, Rome; author's interview with Gime Ahmed.



held essentially the same objective of Eritrean independence.<sup>472</sup> The specter of defection to the Derg likely contributed to the groups' assessment of the threat posed by their rival and thus to the decision to use force, but this dynamic is an integral part of my argument. The rebel groups operating in Tigray had different aspirations for the province, but this did not result in any of them manifesting willingness to find a compromise with the Derg.<sup>473</sup>

Decentralized or undisciplined groups may be especially likely to take part in infighting as the organizations may end up being engulfed in all-out war through a process of inadvertent escalation of low-level clashes. However, as with ideology, organizational structure cannot explain variation over time in inter-rebel war, as there is no indication that the phases in which violence erupted were characterized by especially high levels of decentralization or indiscipline. Moreover, both relatively cohesive and disciplined organizations (the EPLF and the TPLF) and incohesive and undisciplined groups (the ELF and the EDU) launched attacks against their rivals. In addition, the evidence on rebel decision-making presented above shows that inter-rebel war tended to occur following explicit and conscious decisions to use force, even if skirmishes may have influenced those decisions (by intensifying threat perception) or operated as immediate triggers for war.

Many accounts of the Eritrean independence struggle are dominated by the figure of Isaias Afewerki – EPLF's founder and leader – variously described as authoritarian, power-hungry, iron-willed, equally ruthless towards internal and external enemies and endowed with a remarkable gift for military strategy.<sup>474</sup> However, his personality and worldviews clearly cannot

---

<sup>472</sup> Kiflu Tadesse 1998, p. 130; author's interviews with Ahmed Nasser, Tesfay Degiga and Mesfin Hagos.

<sup>473</sup> As noted, the TPLF's goals oscillated between Tigrayan independence and self-determination in a context of a democratic Ethiopia, while the TLF aimed at creating a separate state. Teranafit/EDU and the EPRP envisaged a unitary Ethiopia, albeit freed from the Amhara "yoke".

explain the overall pattern of inter-rebel fighting in Eritrea as the EPLF initiated only one episode of intra-Eritrean rebel war; the ELF – whose leadership changed over time and was less tightly dominated by a single individual – initiated the other three. Moreover, my EPLF-related informants suggest that the 1980 decision to get rid of the ELF’s threat once and for all was driven by widely understood “structural imperatives” (i.e., the massive government offensive under preparation and the risk that the ELF could hinder the EPLF’s defensive efforts), rather than the whims of Isaias. In addition, the same ELF’s leaders that vowed to destroy its splinters in 1971 opted for a suspension of hostilities in late 1974; by the same token, the EPLF’s leaders that decided to wipe out the ELF in 1980 refrained from this course of action in previous years and avoided military confrontation with the TPLF. Some accounts of the TPLF’s military struggle analogously stress the role of the late Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, but this cannot explain the episodes of inter-rebel war in which the TPLF was involved, as they occurred when the organization had a collective leadership (Meles consolidated his hold on power only in the mid-1980s).<sup>475</sup>

Another set of alternative explanations focuses on the role of third-party states and the incumbent. Long-time observers of the Eritrean liberation struggle paint the picture of a herculean, autarkic effort, which brought about independence despite the world’s neglect or even hostility.<sup>476</sup> While it is true that Eritrea represents an exception to the Cold War pattern of super-power confrontation by proxy (the Soviet Union provided massive military aid to the Derg but the United States did not support the insurgents), this interpretation is overstated. Both the ELF

---

<sup>474</sup> Isaias’ figure looms large in the memories of several of my informants and in the accounts provided by journalists that spent time with the EPLF in the field (see, in particular, Pateman 1990 and Connell 1993)

<sup>475</sup> Kahsay Berhe 2005, pp. 76-87; Aregawi Berhe 2009, pp. 188 and 223-8.

<sup>476</sup> See, in particular, Connell 1993.

and the EPLF received crucial support from several Arab countries, Somalia and Sudan.<sup>477</sup>

Although the intensity of Khartoum's help varied inversely with the warmth of its relationship with Addis Ababa, "Sudan provided what any rebellion needs for survival and success: cross-border sanctuaries, secure and reliable supply routes beyond Ethiopian reach, and shelter to waves of Eritrean refugees who, among other things, replenished the guerrillas' ranks."<sup>478</sup>

In any case, foreign powers' machinations do not provide a convincing explanation for intra-Eritrean fighting as the available evidence indicates that they tended to push the rebels to cooperate rather than fight each other. For example, Osman Sabbe Saleh reported several mediation attempts by Sudan in 1975-1977 (one of which with Somali participation) for the formation of a joint Eritrean rebel front.<sup>479</sup> Consistently, Ahmed Nasser noted that in 1974 "[a]ll countries with good relations with the Eritreans were exerting pressure on ELF and EPLF to stop fighting."<sup>480</sup> The TPLF enjoyed similar support from Sudan, in addition to the help provided by EPLF in its first years of activities.<sup>481</sup> Khartoum initially supported TPLF's rival EDU, but there

---

<sup>477</sup> Weldemichael 2013b, pp. 879-80. The EPLF also channeled significant volumes of humanitarian aid from Western donor countries and NGOs through its relief agency – the Eritrean Relief Association, ERA (William Reno, *Warfare in Independent Africa*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 149).

<sup>478</sup> Weldemichael 2013b, p. 879.

<sup>479</sup> Interview conducted by Günter Schröder, 29 December, 1980, Khartoum. Osman Sabbe Saleh noted that in 1976 Sudan should have put more pressure on the EPLF's leadership to reach an agreement but that the 1977 mediation attempt was "very genuine." Sudanese initiatives to make the Eritrean groups cooperate are also reported by Ahmed Karar, Sudan's deputy Chief of Security at the time (interviewed by Günter Schröder) and Haile Menkerios (author's interview).

<sup>480</sup> Author's interview. Tesfay Degiga too reports mediation initiatives launched by Sudan and South Yemen to bring the first ELF-EPLF war to an end (author's interview).

<sup>481</sup> Christopher Clapham, "The International Politics of African Guerrilla Movements," *South African Journal of International Affairs* 3 (1), 1995: 81-91. Somalia provided passports to both Eritrean and Tigrayan insurgents. Following the EPLF's model, the TPLF created its own relief agency – the Relief Society of Tigray, REST – to channel vast amounts of humanitarian aid.

is no indication that in Tigray Sudan departed from the approach it followed in Eritrea of promoting cooperation among opponents of the Ethiopian government.

What about the role of Addis Ababa? Fears that one group might reach a deal with the government at the other's expense were pervasive in the Eritrean liberation struggle. Addis Ababa probably played up those fears in order to drive a wedge between its opponents. For example, in 1976 the Derg did not include the EPLF in its list of public enemies to be "annihilated" (the list included the ELF, the EPRP and the EDU) and held meetings with representatives of the organization.<sup>482</sup> Similarly, in subsequent years both the ELF and the EPLF had separate contacts with the government, through the good offices of East Germany, South Yemen and the Italian Communist party.<sup>483</sup> As noted, the fact that fear of defection to the government may affect inter-rebel threat perception and thus contribute to motivate inter-rebel war is fully consistent with my argument. Window theory would be falsified only if fear of defection (whether arising spontaneously or through government manipulation) were sufficient to cause inter-rebel war, regardless of the presence of windows of opportunity or vulnerability. The empirical evidence presented above suggests this is not the case: inter-rebel war did not occur in the absence of windows of vulnerability or opportunity; both the ELF and the EPLF may have been alarmed by news of contacts between their rival and the Derg from 1976 on, but infighting occurred only when a fleeting window of opportunity for the EPLF to launch a hegemonic bid emerged in 1980. Analogously, there was some fear on the part of the TPLF in the mid-1980s that the EPLF might reach a separate agreement with the Derg, but this did not lead to inter-rebel war in the absence of a window of opportunity or vulnerability. TPLF-related

---

<sup>482</sup> Kiflu Tadesse 1998, p. 130.

<sup>483</sup> Author's interviews with Tesfay Degiga and Ahmed Nasser.

sources do not reveal specific fears of defection driving the group's actions towards other organizations operating in Tigray. In fact, TPLF's leaders thought that the Derg saw the group as less of a serious threat than Teranafit, EDU and EPRP and thus would not provide support to its rivals in Tigray.<sup>484</sup>

This observation points to concerns about the endogeneity of windows of opportunity, to which I now turn. At issue is not that the hypothesized causes of inter-rebel war are themselves caused by some other factor, but rather that windows of vulnerability could be just the last link in a longer and more complex causal chain, not captured by my theory. In particular, governments may refrain from bringing to bear their full offensive power on the insurgents so as to induce inter-rebel war. If windows of opportunity are systematically engineered by governments, my argument could be ignoring a key factor underlying government decision-making, thus missing an important part of the explanation of inter-rebel war. A careful examination of the episodes of rebel infighting in Eritrea and Tigray, however, reveals that in some cases the limited threat posed by the Ethiopian government was a function of circumstances beyond its control (essentially exogenous) and that when Addis Ababa had the ability to do so, it would launch all-out attacks against all the Eritrean insurgents rather than trying to create a wedge between them by sitting back. Moreover, it is not clear that, even if the government had wanted to trigger inter-rebel war by avoiding excessive military pressure on the insurgents, they would have simply taken the bait. In fact, we should expect rebel groups to make crucial decisions about inter-rebel war based on signals and indicators of government capabilities and intentions that are hard to fake, such as the state and commitments of the armed forces as well as the political climate in the

---

<sup>484</sup> Author's interviews with Aregawi Berhe, Ghidey Zeratsion and Gebru Asrat. Teranafit and EDU were associated with Tigray's hereditary governor Ras Mengesha and other well-known former regime's figures, while the EPRP had a large following in all of Ethiopia's urban centers; by contrast, as Aregawi Berhe put it, "the TPLF was small and unknown."

capital. The overall empirical pattern that emerges from the following discussion is one in which the government opportunistically abstained from intervention in the face of rebel infighting when it was weak or when, despite being strong, it was unable to launch a major offensive on a short notice, rather than cleverly provoking inter-rebel war by feigning inability to project power.

During the first ELF-EPLF war (1972-1974), as in the previous year, the government maintained a low profile in Eritrea, eschewing large-scale offensives and largely enjoying the spectacle of intra-Eritrean fight.<sup>485</sup> In 1978-79, reinvigorated by massive Soviet aid and emboldened by its victory against the Somali invasion in the south, the Derg launched a series of all-out offensives against both the ELF and the EPLF, with the goal of ending the insurgent threat once and for all, rather than trying to pit one group against the other. The window of opportunity exploited by the EPLF in 1980-81 to get rid of its rival was a hiatus (fully appreciated by the group's leadership) between government assaults, which was due to the logistical challenges involved in organizing the Red Star offensive, rather than a forward-thinking government design to ignite inter-rebel war (of which there is no indication). Analogously, the limited government's presence that enabled inter-rebel war in Tigray in 1975-78 was due to the state of disarray in which the Ethiopian armed forces found themselves in the aftermath of the 1974 revolution and the spread of armed rebellions throughout the country. TPLF's leaders were fully aware of the government's limited ability to launch large-scale offensives in the province and in any case thought that the Derg would not want to attack the

---

<sup>485</sup> ELF's counterintelligence officer Gime Ahmed, as noted above, recalls intercepting government communications expressing satisfaction in the face of inter-rebel fighting (author's interview). The government had an even more limited presence in the province in 1965, when the ELF wiped out the ELM contingent bent on initiating armed struggle; in that case the government probably would not have been able to intervene even if it had decided to do so, as the ELF-ELM clash consisted of a single, decisive battle.

TPLF when busy fighting other rebel groups as Teranafit/EDU and EPRP were considered more serious threats for the regime.<sup>486</sup>

## 7. Conclusions

The insurgencies in Eritrea and Tigray provide strong support to my argument. The vast majority of instances of inter-rebel war in the two cases were driven by window of opportunity logic or a combination of window of opportunity and vulnerability logics. In Eritrea, the EPLF emerged on top by launching a hegemonic bid against the ELF (1980-81), which had previously opportunistically wiped out the ELM (1965) and the ELF-PLF (1978) and unsuccessfully tried to nip in the bud in the EPLF (1972-74). Similarly “the TPLF saw it as imperative to claim and realize a *power monopoly* in Tigray [sic],” which it achieved by sequentially crushing the weaker TLF (1975), Teranafit (1976) and the EPRP (1978-79).<sup>487</sup> Window theory generally correctly predicts the absence of inter-rebel war in moments in which its costs would be prohibitively high (1974-79 in ELF-EPLF relations and 1975-77 in TPLF-EPRP relations) or its benefits too low due to the lack of overlapping bases of support (most notably, the peaceful relationship between the two ethnic hegemons – the EPLF and the EPLF).

The fights between the EDU and TPLF and between TPLF and ELF represent exceptions to the pattern of rebel groups abstaining from infighting across ethnic lines; however, the

---

<sup>486</sup> Author’s interviews with Aregawi Berhe, Ghidey Zeratsion and Gebru Asrat. In fact, according to Aregawi Berhe, the TPLF put out feelers for tactical cooperation with the Derg against the common threat posed by Teranafit/EDU (the TPLF was particularly interested in receiving weapons), but no agreement was reached. By contrast, Aregawi Berhe denies any attempt by the TPLF to establish contacts with the Derg to cooperate against the EPRP, while Kiflu Tadesse (1998, pp. 403-4) reports that the EPRP suspected that such an arrangement was in place.

<sup>487</sup> Aregawi Berhe 2009, p. 278 (emphasis in the original).

available evidence does not reveal causal processes at odds with my argument and thus these two failed predictions are not especially damaging for it.

In the next two chapters I turn to shadow case studies and statistical analysis to assess the external validity of window theory.



## Chapter 5

### Assessing External Validity with Shadow Case Studies: Lebanon, Sri Lanka and Syria

#### 1. Introduction

This chapter presents three shadow case studies to assess whether window theory can explain inter-rebel war in a variety of geo-political contexts beyond Iraq and Ethiopia. The shadow case studies explore the dynamics of civil wars in Lebanon (1975-89), Sri Lanka (1983-2009) and Syria (2011-). All three are multi-party ethnic civil wars with multiple episodes of inter-rebel fighting, thus offering several opportunities for within-case controlled comparisons.

Each of the cases also offers peculiar advantages. The Lebanese civil war is especially useful as it features both coethnic and non-coethnic armed groups operating in close proximity and thus with opportunities to fight each other, which allows me to assess the hypothesis of coethnicity as a cause of inter-rebel war. Moreover, *prima facie* this is not an easy case for my theory, as the Lebanon's civil war is infamously described as an uniquely complex conflict devoid of clearly identifiable patterns of fighting between its participants – “a war-of-all-against-all”, in which “the number of opponents was beyond strategy” and at some point or another all of them “had fought one another in a full schedule of round-robin matches.”<sup>488</sup> Syria's civil war presents the advantage of featuring jihadi groups, which permits me to observe whether these increasingly important actors on the world politics scene behave as window theory would suggest. In addition, the case is inherently interesting as it has been a major focus of US foreign policy since its onset in 2011; this fact, I argue, more than offsets an inevitable drawback of

---

<sup>488</sup> Charles Winslow, *Lebanon: War and Politics in a Fragmented Society* (New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 269, 249 and 220.

studying an ongoing civil war – the limited quality and patchiness of the available evidence. Finally, the Tamil insurgency in Sri Lanka allows me to explore the validity of my argument beyond the context of Africa and the Middle East (broadly defined), where all other cases are located.<sup>489</sup>

## **2. The Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990)**

Lebanon's fifteen-year civil war saw a multitude of armed organizations fighting each other in an ever-shifting pattern of alliances along multiple crosscutting ideological and ethno-sectarian cleavages. The struggle over the distribution of political power among the country's ethno-sectarian groups overlapped and interacted with US-Soviet competition for influence in the Middle East, the Arab-Israeli conflict and intra-Arab rivalries, as reflected in Syria's and Israel's occupations, the Palestinian Liberation Organization's (PLO) involvement in the fight, and the deployment of United Nations and multi-national peacekeeping forces.

In what follows, I show that window theory explains a substantial part of the variation of the case (but by no means all) and performs better than alternative explanations. The case also

---

<sup>489</sup> Other candidates for post-WWII multi-party ethnic civil wars outside the main geographical scope of the dissertation were the civil wars in Bosnia (1992-95), Burma/Myanmar (1948-), Guatemala (1965-95), Georgia (1991-94), India (Kashmir) (1988-96), Indonesia (1958-61), the Philippines (1986-) and Tajikistan (1992-97). I narrowed down the list to Sri Lanka, Kashmir and Burma as cases characterized by substantial variation on the dependent variable (i.e., multiple instances of inter-rebel war), based on the secondary literature and the UCDP Non-State Conflict Dataset (Ralph Sundberg, Kristine Eck and Joakim Kreutz, "Introducing the UCDP Non-State Conflict Dataset," *Journal of Peace Research* 49 (2), 2012: 351-62). As noted in Chapter 2, given the limited available process evidence for the shadow case studies, the benefits of substantial within-case variation on the dependent variable are mostly related to controlling for case-specific features rather than to observing the mechanisms envisioned by the theory multiple times. For this set of cases, I mostly rely on within-case congruence, which allows me to ascertain whether the independent and dependent variables covary as the theory suggests, holding constant background features of the case; selecting cases with no (or very little) variation on the dependent variable would make it extremely difficult to rule out the possibility that the outcome is being determined by some constant case-specific factor that makes inter-rebel war either highly unlikely or highly likely. Sri Lanka is preferable to Kashmir, as the latter features Muslim rebel groups, which are present in other case studies; the choice of Sri Lanka over Burma is a function of the overall better quality of the literature on the Tamil rebel groups (but notice the important exception of the work of Martin Smith on Burma's civil war).

allows me to further delineate the scope conditions of the theory, identifying features of civil war environments in which the dynamics envisioned by my argument are less likely to operate. The analysis below suggests that window theory is a less useful guide to understanding inter-rebel war in contexts in which belligerents on both sides have virtually no hope of making significant military gains against their main enemy and, correspondingly, they face no meaningful existential threats – a situation that prevailed in Lebanon in the mid- to late-1980s. When the costs and risks involved in inter-rebel war are exceedingly low, as victory or survival are not at stake, the structural constraints to inter-rebel war that my theory posits are less stringent; under these circumstances, we should be more likely to observe inter-rebel clashes brought about by a host of generally less powerful causes, such as groups' desire for a marginal expansion of the territory or resources under their control, ideology, third-party states' incitement or individual leaders' psychology and inter-personal antipathy.

Before proceeding with the analysis, an important terminological note is in order. Throughout this case study, unlike in the rest of the dissertation, I refer to on-side fighting – a major violent clash *between non-state armed actors that are on the same side* of a civil war – as my dependent variable, rather than inter-rebel war.<sup>490</sup> This decision is motivated by the fact that for much of the conflict the Lebanese government was not an active belligerent (1977-82, 1987-88) or only played a secondary role in the fight (1975-76, 1983-1986) compared to the various militias and external interveners.<sup>491</sup> Under these circumstances the rationale for excluding pro-government militias and their relations from my analysis – the presumption that they have much

---

<sup>490</sup> I borrow the term from Jonah Schulhofer-Wohl, "Fighting Between Allies and the Civil War in Syria," in *The Political Science of Syria's War*, POMEPS Briefings 22, 2013.

<sup>491</sup> For a discussion of challenges involved in determining which actor should be considered the government and whether it is in fact a belligerent in different phases of the Lebanese civil war, see "Lebanon," UCDP Conflict Encyclopedia (available at [http://www.ucdp.uu.se/gpdatabase/gpcountry.php?id=92&regionSelect=10-Middle\\_East#](http://www.ucdp.uu.se/gpdatabase/gpcountry.php?id=92&regionSelect=10-Middle_East#), last accessed on April 25, 2015).

less leeway for independent strategic decision-making compared to their rebel counterparts – is not compelling. This broader conceptualization of the dependent variable offers the benefit of substantially increasing its within-case variation, but I acknowledge the drawback of potentially raising concerns about the relevance of the findings to other civil wars that do not share with Lebanon this peculiar feature.

In order to facilitate the reader’s journey through the complexity of the Lebanese civil war, I break down the case study in six phases, based on whether the conditions for inter-rebel war were present or absent. For each phase, I discuss my argument’s fit with the available historical data. I then address alternative explanations and potential endogeneity concerns.

### ***First phase: Lebanese Front vs. National Movement (1975-76)***

The initial phase of the war saw an alliance of Christian Maronite-dominated groups (often dubbed as “rightist”, “conservative” or “rightist-Christian”) – the Lebanese Front – pitted against a loose coalition of opposition organizations – the National Movement (often referred to as “leftist”, “revisionist” or “Muslim”). The National Movement enjoyed the crucial military support of PLO’s forces deployed in Lebanon, whose influence in the country’s affairs the Lebanese Front was set on curtailing.<sup>492</sup> The Lebanese Front’s military wing (formally established in the summer of 1976) comprised two main militias – the Phalanges and the Tigers – and several other smaller ones (most notably the Guardians of the Cedar and the “Tanzim;” the Marada Brigade – another smaller Christian militia in the Lebanese Front – was not part of the alliance’s joint military command). The National Movement was a collection of ethnically and ideologically diverse organizations: the Druze-dominated but secularly oriented Progressive

---

<sup>492</sup> For reasons of space, in this case study I do not discuss the intricate relationships and frequent clashes between the various Palestinian organizations operating in Lebanon.

Socialist Party, the Sunni Mourabitoun, the multiethnic Lebanese Communist Party and various Arab nationalist formations such as the Syrian Social Nationalist Party and the Syrian and Iraqi branches of the Baath Socialist Party. The National Movement's "glue" was a profound disaffection with Christian dominance of Lebanon's power-sharing system, which was perceived as especially unfair in light of the decline of the Christian share of the population since its establishment in 1943.<sup>493</sup>

Two shooting incidents on April 13, 1975 provided the spark for the explosion of long-simmering tensions between the two camps.<sup>494</sup> Large-scale fighting, characterized by rapidly shifting battlefield trends, would soon ensue. The Lebanese Army was initially deployed as a buffer between the two camps but it quickly broke along ethno-sectarian lines: several thousand heavily armed Muslim troops sided with the National Movement (under the name of Lebanese Arab Army), while Christian units fought alongside the Lebanese Front. After initial territorial gains by the Christian alliance, in early 1976 the tide turned in favor of the National Movement as the PLO got involved more deeply in the fight and Syrian support for the "revisionists" intensified.<sup>495</sup> Then in a surprising development, Syria launched a large-scale intervention in support of the Christian side, which was on the verge of military defeat. The newly formed

---

<sup>493</sup> Tony Badran, "Lebanon's Militia Wars," in Barry Rubin, ed., *Lebanon: Liberation, Conflict and Crisis* (New York: Palgrave, 2009), pp. 37-46; Theodor Hanf, *Coexistence in Wartime Lebanon: Decline of a State and Rise of a Nation* (London: Centre for Lebanese Studies, 1993), pp. 181-94; Walid Khalidi, *Conflict and Violence in Lebanon: A Confrontation in the Middle East* (Cambridge, MA: Center for International Affairs, Harvard University, 1979), pp. 58-65 and 68-82; Lewis W. Snider, "The Lebanese Forces: Their Origins and Role in Lebanon's Politics," *Middle East Journal* 38 (1), 1984: 1-33. David Gilmour, *Lebanon: The Fractured Country* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), p. 123.

<sup>494</sup> Khalidi 1979, p. 47; Antoine J. Abraham, *The Lebanon War* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996), pp. 1-3; Hanf 1993, pp. 206-10.

<sup>495</sup> Hanf 1993, pp. 210-2; Elizabeth Picard, *Lebanon, a Shattered Country: Myths and Realities of the Wars in Lebanon* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 2002), p. 110; Jawaid Iqbal, *The Lebanese Civil War: Issues, Actors and Outcome* (Aligarh, India: Centre for West Asian Studies, 1998), pp. 72-3 and 79-80.

alliance between the Christian forces and Damascus inflicted serious losses on the National Movement until Syria imposed a ceasefire and deployed a large force in central and northern Lebanon to enforce it.<sup>496</sup>

My argument correctly predicts that the belligerents would refrain from on-side fighting in this phase of the civil war as the two competing alliances were engaged in high-intensity conflict. Infighting would have entailed a significant increase in the risk of military defeat for the two alliances when they were in dire straits (first the Lebanese Front, then the National Movement) and high opportunity costs in terms of forgone military gains when they were having the upper hand.<sup>497</sup> The ethnically homogenous Lebanese Front and the highly diverse National Movement displayed comparable levels of alliance cohesion in the face of similar battlefield situations.

### ***Second phase: “Pax” Syriana (1977-78)***

As Syria consolidated its control over much of Lebanon in late 1976 and early 1977, fighting largely subsided. My argument suggests that the Lebanese Front would be more prone to infighting than the National Movement, given the former’s relative ethnic homogeneity.

However, the conditions for intra-Christian war were not present until 1980, when the Phalanges

---

<sup>496</sup> Khalidi 1979, pp. 82-4; Hanf 1993, pp. 215-26; Edgar O’Ballance, *Civil War in Lebanon, 1975-92* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), p. 48; Iqbal 1998, pp. 74-5; Sandra Mackey, *A Mirror of the Arab World: Lebanon in Conflict* (New York: Norton, 2008), pp. 108-9; Winslow 1996, pp. 208-12; Lawrence L. Whetten, “The Military Dimension,” in P. Edward Haley and Lewis W. Snider, eds., *Lebanon in Crisis: Participants and Issues* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1979). Damascus had previously intervened to forestall a Christian victory and the associated risk of a partition of Lebanon but was “not prepared to countenance a victory of the Palestinian-National Movement coalition. Such a victory would raise the spectre of Israeli intervention – or the emergence of a militant politico-military bastion of completely independent Palestinian organizations and Lebanese like Jumblatt [the National Movement’s leader], whom the Syrians regarded as a political buccaneer” (Hanf 1993, p. 218).

<sup>497</sup> There is no indication of a rapid shift in the intra-Christian balance of power or a mounting threat (i.e., a window of vulnerability) that could motivate fighting between the coethnic members of the Lebanese Front even in the face of high costs. As noted, the opposing alliance was ethnically heterogeneous and thus not expected to experience infighting.

launched a hegemonic bid. In fact, the Lebanese Front's threat environment did not substantially improve with the end of the first phase of the war, as it soon became evident that the Christians had de facto traded the threat of the National Movement for that posed by the Syrian juggernaut. The Christian militias only grudgingly accepted the deployment of Syrian forces in much of the country (including Christian strongholds in eastern Beirut).<sup>498</sup> Given the ambiguity of its plans for Lebanon and the demonstrated willingness and ability to rapidly bring to bear its military might to shape outcomes on the ground, Syria's threat loomed large in 1977. That Damascus could turn its gunsight against the Christian coalition was made apparent by the logistical support that the former was providing to the Palestinians and the National Movement in southern Lebanon near the border with Israel, where fighting continued throughout 1977 (Syrian forces had not deployed there pursuant Tel Aviv's warning to that effect).<sup>499</sup> Mutual suspicion between the Christian groups and Syria deepened in the course of the year as the former established close ties with Israel and the latter reconciled with the Palestinians.<sup>500</sup>

---

<sup>498</sup> Hanf 1993, pp. 225-6 and 231; Khalidi 1979, p. 65.

<sup>499</sup> Abraham 1996, pp. 104-5; Hanf 1993, pp. 226-7. Abraham (1996, p. 100) reports that as "PLO and leftist forces...tightened their grip around the [Christian] villages [in the south], Bashir Gemayel [the Phalangists' leader] warned the Syrian leadership that the towns would not be abandoned to face a lonely death... Clearly, the war was on again." As O'Ballance (1998, p. 67) notes, Syria's support for the Palestinians in the south "alarmed the Lebanese government but also Chamoun and Gemayel, the leaders of the Lebanese Front."

<sup>500</sup> O'Ballance 1998, pp. 65-6; Khalidi 1979, p. 110-1; Abraham 1996, p. 95; Robert G. Rabil, *Embattled Neighbors: Syria, Israel and Lebanon* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003), p. 55; Wadi Haddad, *Lebanon: The Politics of Revolving Doors* (New York: Praeger, 1985), pp. 57-8. As Yair Evron notes, throughout 1977 the "Syrians renewed their contacts with the PLO and appeared reluctant to withdraw from Lebanon. Moreover, the more relaxed Syrian relations with the Muslims and the PLO convinced part of the Maronite community that the Syrians may one day turn against them" (*War and Intervention in Lebanon: the Israeli-Syrian Deterrence Dialogue*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987, pp. 66). Consistently, according to Itamar Rabinovich, some key Christian leaders in 1977 "felt that a showdown with Syria was inevitable. Syria, they argued, was determined to stay in Lebanon and dominate it" (*The War for Lebanon, 1970-1985*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985, p. 110). Damascus' desire to mend fences with the Palestinians further grew in late 1977, when Egyptian-Syrian relations broke down and President Anwar Sadat made a historic visit to Jerusalem, leaving Syria in a state of international isolation (Evron 1987, p. 67; Hanf 1993, pp. 229-32).

Large-scale fighting between Syrian forces and the Christian coalition eventually erupted in April 1978 in Beirut and then raged in the summer and fall in the capital and the north. At last, in October 1978 Damascus decided to end its inconclusive bombardment and siege of Christian-held eastern Beirut in the face of the strenuous resistance of the Maronite militias, turn over its peacekeeping activities there to the Lebanese Army and withdraw its forces from the area.<sup>501</sup> As Antoine Abraham notes, in the 1978 fight “Syria had committed most of its forces in the northern half of Lebanon into battle, and reinforcements continued to pour into Lebanon, tapping Syria’s reserves... It had proven too costly for the Syrian regime. Syrian hospitals were filled to capacity with the dying and the wounded. Not since the last Arab-Israeli war had Syria seen its forces return home so badly mauled.”<sup>502</sup> Consistent with window theory, no large-scale fighting between Christian militias occurred in this period,<sup>503</sup> as they watched with apprehension an overwhelmingly powerful and potentially hostile Syrian army taking over the country in 1977 and actually clashed against it in 1978.<sup>504</sup>

---

<sup>501</sup> Hanf 1993, pp. 231-4; Abraham 1996, pp. 108-23. Syrian troops started withdrawing from positions in and around east Beirut in late 1978 and early 1979.

<sup>502</sup> Abraham 1996, p. 121.

<sup>503</sup> Some low-level intra-Christian clashes did occur in this period; most notably, the Phalanges engaged in skirmishes with the Marada Brigade in the spring of 1978, culminating with the assassination by a Phalangist squad of Marada’s leader and his wife and daughter. These episodes (albeit politically consequential, as they marked the exit of the Marada Brigade from the Lebanese Front) do not appear to amount to the kind of all-out fighting that I seek to explain. In fact, they consisted of isolated clashes with the participation of a small number of fighters from the two groups (see, for example, O’Ballance 1998, p. 79; Abraham 1996, p. 112; Hanf 1993, pp. 236-7; and Winslow 1996, p. 225).

<sup>504</sup> As in the previous phase of the civil war, there is no indication of a rapid shift in the intra-Christian balance of power or a mounting threat (i.e., a window of vulnerability) that could prompt one of the members of the Lebanese Front to attempt a resurrection gamble.



### *Third phase: The emergence of a window of opportunity (1978-80)*

The end of the Syrian offensive in the fall of 1978 marked the beginning of a period of gradually receding threat for the Christians, bottoming out in early 1980 with the redeployment of the bulk of Damascus' forces from the entire Beirut area to the Bekaa valley in the east of Lebanon.<sup>505</sup> As Theodor Hanf observes, “[c]ertainly, they [the leaders of the Lebanese Front] were not under any illusions about Syria’s military superiority. But the fighting in 1978 had revealed that Syria hesitated to pay the price in lives and material needed to break the resistance of the Christian militias. Their hopes were strengthened by Assad’s domestic problems.”<sup>506</sup> In fact, Damascus had been dealing since 1978 with a growing insurgency waged by the Muslim Brotherhood within the country’s borders. Moreover, the Camp David Accords in September 1978 and the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel in March 1979 left Syria increasingly isolated in the region and dangerously exposed to Tel Aviv’s military might.<sup>507</sup> As Yair Evron points out, the “difficulties faced by Asad both in the Arab world and at home would not have been sufficient to force a change in the Syrian posture in Lebanon. But combined with Syria’s continued inability to impose its will in Lebanon, they obliged Damascus to search for ways to diminish the Syrian presence, and so reduce the costs involved in staying there. In January 1980, Syria announced a plan for a limited withdrawal from the Beirut area.”<sup>508</sup> Additional signs of the limited Syrian threat were Damascus’ conciliatory feelers to the Phalanges in the spring of 1980.<sup>509</sup>

---

<sup>505</sup> Picard 2002, p. 119; O’Ballance 1996, p. 93-4; Hanf 1993, p. 243.

<sup>506</sup> Hanf 1993, p. 246.

<sup>507</sup> Rabinovich 1985, p. 111; Rabil 2003, p. 62.

Consistent with my argument, in a moment in which Syria – the main opponent of the Christians in this phase of the war – was widely perceived as weak and preoccupied with other issues, the Phalanges launched a hegemonic bid.<sup>510</sup> The balance of power within the Lebanese Front was markedly favorable to the Phalanges, with about 8,000 fighters compared to the 4,000-strong Tigers; the Guardians of the Cedars and the Tanzim were clearly in a different league, with fighting forces in the hundreds rather than thousands.<sup>511</sup> Once Syrian troops had withdrawn from Beirut, in July 1980 the Phalanges conducted a series of coordinated attacks against offices, barracks and strongpoints of the Tiger militia.<sup>512</sup> In “a quick, extremely brutal and successful operation” the Phalanges defeated their strongest rival.<sup>513</sup> Faced with no alternatives, the Tigers’ leadership surrendered and gave up the group’s weapons and ammunitions, while its fighters were absorbed in a unified militia – the Lebanese Forces – under the control of Bashir Gemayel

---

<sup>508</sup> Evron 1987, p. 90. As Rabinovich (1985, p. 113) points out, the redeployment of Syrian forces to the Bekaa valley “was a statement of priorities” for Damascus, as that was considered Syria’s main defense line against a possible Israeli attack, which had already intervened in south Lebanon in 1978 to attack the PLO’s forces.

<sup>509</sup> Rabinovich 1985, p. 114.

<sup>510</sup> Rabinovich (1985, p. 113) notes out that the “other protagonists in the struggle over Lebanon’s future were fully aware of the extent to which the regime’s weakness and preoccupation with other matters limited its ability to pursue its objectives in Lebanon” (see also Rabil 2003, p. 62). Consistently, O’Ballance (1998, p. 93) reports that following the announcement of the Syrian withdrawal from Beirut “[i]t was assumed by the West that Assad wanted to renounce his role as the ‘policeman of Lebanon’ before he became too involved in the unwinnable, multisided civil war in the country, and that as he had shouldered the responsibility for some four years it was now time for Lebanon to stand on its own, to work towards national reconciliation and to rebuild its economy.”

<sup>511</sup> Badran 2009, pp. 38-40. All other sources that discuss the balance of power among Christian militias provide a consistent picture (see Hanf 1993, pp. 190-1 and 247; Rabinovich 1985, p. 70; Rabil 2003, p. 60; Jonathan C. Randal, *Going All the Way: Christian Warlords, Israeli Adventurers, and the War in Lebanon*, New York: The Viking Press, 1984, p. 117). Apart from Badran (2009, p. 39), who claims that the Tigers were “less organized” than the Phalanges, there is no indication of major differences across Christian militias in terms of other dimensions of power (i.e., internal cohesion, tactical and operational proficiency, and type of weaponry).

<sup>512</sup> Hanf 1993, pp. 246-8; Rabinovich 1985, p. 114; Winslow 1996, p. 227.

<sup>513</sup> Hanf 1993, pp. 247-8.

– the head of the Phalanges.<sup>514</sup> As the Guardians of the Cedars and the Tanzim – by far weaker groups – acquiesced to their incorporation in Bashir Gemayel’s organization, “[t]he destruction of the Tigers and the absorption of their remnants into the Lebanese Forces meant that for the first time the Maronites of Central Lebanon were represented by a single organization.”<sup>515</sup>

The literature paints a picture of the Phalangist leadership’s calculus consistent with the hypothesis that coethnicity prompts rebel groups to consider resorting to force to get rid of direct competitors and to grow stronger by absorbing their resources. According to Hanf, Bashir Gemayel had come to the conclusion as early as 1976 that the Lebanese Front would be more effective as a “tightly disciplined, properly led, unified commando” and thus “resolved to use violence” to achieve that objective.<sup>516</sup> As Itamar Rabinovich observes, “[t]he Phalangist drive was more than the pursuit of power and domination; it was rooted in a concept in which the unification of the Maronite and Christian communities’ resources was a crucial interim strategic goal in the struggle over Lebanon’s future.”<sup>517</sup>

---

<sup>514</sup> Rabil 2003, p. 60.

<sup>515</sup> Snider 1984, p. 9. Two Christian formations in the north and the south remained outside of the Lebanese Forces. In the north, the Marada Brigade maintained close ties with Damascus and enjoyed the protection of its army (Hanf 1993, pp. 236-7; Winslow 1996, p. 227). In the south, Israel’s military and Lebanese army Major Saad Haddad’s militia (equipped and trained by Tel Aviv) jointly controlled a buffer zone along the Israeli border (Hanf 1993, pp. 226-30 and 241-2; Picard 2002, p. 119; Augustus Richard Norton, *Amal and the Shi'a: Struggle for the Soul of Lebanon*, Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1987, p. 131). The overwhelming power of the two entities’ allies would have made a forceful attempt to take them over prohibitively costly for the Lebanese Forces.

<sup>516</sup> Hanf 1993, p. 247.

<sup>517</sup> Rabinovich 1985, p. 114. Similarly, Rabil (2003, p. 59) implies, just before discussing the destruction of the Tigers, that the Phalangist leader thought force could be used to get rid of threatening rivals and grow at their expense: “Bashir [Gemayel] had a clear cut plan... he perceived power as emanating from the barrel of a gun. He believed that political predominance in Lebanon had to be based on military power to be effective. For this reason, he strove to unify Christian military power under his command. Inveterate Maronite squabbling was a luxury he could not afford.”

The Phalanges in fact benefited handsomely from the hegemonic bid. Besides acquiring a large number of Tigers' cadres and weapons, they gained unrivaled access to the recruitment pool and tax base of the Christian community of central Lebanon. Under Bashir Gemayel's leadership, the ongoing process of building an embryonic Christian state within Lebanon accelerated; the Lebanese Forces introduced conscription and levied direct taxes on businesses and homeowners as well as sales taxes and custom duties.<sup>518</sup> In the absence of coethnic competitors, the Christian population docilely complied. As Jonathan Randal observes, after the Phalangist victory over the Tigers, "[w]ith rare – almost personal – exceptions, the Marounistan [the Maronite-dominated area in central-eastern Lebanon] Christians now fell into line behind their most militant, radical leader [Bashir Gemayel]."<sup>519</sup>

***Fourth phase: From Christian ascendancy to uncontested Syrian suzerainty (1981-1984)***

The years 1981-1983 saw attempts by the Lebanese Forces to expand their territory and to drag Israel into the fight as a counterweight to Syria so as to negotiate a settlement of Lebanon's civil war from a position of strength. Damascus and its Lebanese allies violently resisted the Christian initiatives and Tel Aviv's intervention proved not to be decisive. Eventually, in early 1984, facing a tightening encirclement of enemy forces and bereft of external support, Lebanon's President Amin Gemayel (the brother of the deceased Bashir) capitulated to most of Syria's demands and formed a national reconciliation cabinet including both the Lebanese Forces and Damascus' allies. Consistent with window theory, this phase of the civil war was characterized

---

<sup>518</sup> Hanf 1993, p. 333; Rabinovich 1985, p. 115.

<sup>519</sup> Randal 1983, p. 140. Similarly, Rabil (2003, p. 59) points out that "Bashir [Gemayel] was able to mobilize the Christian community and draw support from a large segment of the population who not too long before disapproved of and even despised the Phalangists."

by the absence of episodes of large-scale on-side fighting: its prospective costs were high, given the intensity of the fight along the main civil war cleavage, and the benefits low, given that the pro-Syrian camp (the only side with multiple non-state armed actors) housed a broad array of groups with distinct ethnic bases.

**Figure 5.1: Map of Lebanon**



Emboldened by the successful unification of the Christian armed groups, Damascus' persistent weakness and Israel's diplomatic and military support, in late 1980 the Lebanese Forces set out to bring their ambitious vision for Lebanon – prominently featuring Christian political predominance and the end of Syria's occupation – to reality. The first move consisted in trying to expand their territory by incorporating Zahle in the Maronite heartland (see Map 5.1 above). The Lebanese Forces had a strong presence in the town but Syria controlled all its access points. Damascus saw the Christian attempt to break its chokehold on Zahle by building a new road through the Lebanon mountain range as a serious threat, given that this would represent an ideal route for a possible Israeli offensive into the Bekaa valley and Syria itself. A sustained Syrian siege and shelling of Zahle eventually coerced the Lebanese Forces to desist from their effort in June 1981.<sup>520</sup>

The Lebanese Forces' disappointment for failing to drag Israel in the fight over Zahle did not last long as Tel Aviv soon started preparations for a ground offensive against Palestinian forces in Lebanon.<sup>521</sup> In June 1982 the Israeli forces rapidly swept away PLO's units in the south and Syrian forces encountered on their way to Beirut, where they entered largely unopposed by pro-Syrian armed groups. In August the Palestinian camps in west Beirut capitulated to Israel's siege and heavy bombing and PLO's forces there were evacuated from Lebanon under the protection of a multinational contingent of American, French and Italian troops.<sup>522</sup> The Christian leaders saw the deployment of the Israeli army over much of Lebanon as a clear opportunity for

---

<sup>520</sup> Randal 1983, pp. 139 and 224-6; Hanf 1993, pp. 248-52; Winslow 1996, pp. 240-1; Rabil 2003, pp. 62-3.

<sup>521</sup> Randal 1983, pp. 245-7. According to Hanf (1993, p. 256) “[f]rom 1981... all sides had been anticipating a serious confrontation between Israel and the PLO in Lebanon.” Similarly, Winslow (1996, pp. 228-9) notes that in 1981 the “preliminaries for the invasion of 1982 were extensive and hardly secret” and “[p]reparations for invasion were so overt that Israel was forced to spend extra time and effort denying that it was about to invade.”

<sup>522</sup> Hanf 1993, pp. 256-64; Randal 1983 pp. 248-71; Picard 2002, pp. 123-5; Evron 1987, pp. 129-54.

establishing Christian supremacy.<sup>523</sup> Thus in late 1982 the Lebanese Forces (with some support from the Christian-dominated units of the Lebanese army) launched an attack on the Druze stronghold (known as the Chouf) south of Beirut.<sup>524</sup> At the same time, the Christian-dominated Lebanese army gradually took control of west Beirut as Israeli forces withdrew from the capital.<sup>525</sup>

However, the Christians' fortunes were soon to plummet. The Druze Progressive Socialist Party, with Syrian support, successfully resisted the Christian thrust in the Chouf and pushed the assailants back by the end of 1983.<sup>526</sup> As Israel, mired in a domestic political storm over the occurrence of massacres in Palestinian refugee camps under its forces' watch, signaled its intention to disengage from Lebanese politics and withdraw from the country, Damascus regained the initiative.<sup>527</sup> With generous Syrian military support, the Progressive Socialist Party, the Shia Amal movement, the Sunni Mourabitoun militia and other smaller groups took control of west Beirut from the Lebanese army in February 1984 after several months of fighting.<sup>528</sup> An

---

<sup>523</sup> Robert Rabil (2003, p. 68) reports that at a meeting of Lebanese Forces' leaders in June 1982 (which he attended), Bashir Gemayel spoke of "Israel's invasion as the single most important event in Lebanon's civil war" and "explained that if the Christians played their cards right, they would emerge as their real victorious party in the war for Lebanon."

<sup>524</sup> Hanf 1993, pp. 275-6. Controlling the Chouf would allow the Lebanese Forces to ensure the safety of the Christian population living there and establish a land link between the Christian stronghold in central Lebanon and Israel.

<sup>525</sup> Rabil 2003, p. 71.

<sup>526</sup> Hanf 1993, pp. 276-9; Picard 2002, p. 127; Winslow 1996, pp. 236-42.

<sup>527</sup> Israel's gradual withdrawal started in August 1983 (Hanf 1993, p. 275). The killing of a large number of civilians in the Palestinian camps of Sabra and Shatila in west Beirut was perpetrated by elements of the Lebanese Forces; the Israeli army, however, was accused of connivance as they controlled the areas surrounding the camps and thus presumably had knowledge of the events taking place inside them over the span of several days (Rabil 2003, p. 74; Evron 1987, pp. 160-1).

internationally isolated President Amin Gemayel succumbed to his adversaries' joint military pressure; days after the "fall" of west Beirut, he visited Damascus and acceded to his opponents' key demands, in particular the abrogation of a de facto peace agreement between Lebanon and Israel and the formation a national reconciliation cabinet with the inclusion of opposition forces.<sup>529</sup> In the meantime, Amal had been inflicting heavy losses on Israeli troops in southern Lebanon throughout 1984, which prompted Tel Aviv's decision to withdraw its forces to a "security zone" on the border in January 1985.<sup>530</sup>

The various groups pitted against the Lebanese Forces and the Christian-dominated army did not fight each other in this phase of the civil war.<sup>531</sup> Window theory correctly predicts this outcome, given the intensity of the fighting between the two opposing camps and the ethnic heterogeneity Syria's Lebanese allies.<sup>532</sup> In 1981-83, the pro-Syrian groups were under significant military pressure from Christian forces and faced either an imminent or ongoing intervention by Israel, whose ultimate goals were highly uncertain; infighting under these

---

<sup>528</sup> Amal had initially cooperated with the National Movement but then sided with Syria after its intervention in 1976. The group did not participate in the Lebanese civil war until 1984, but had clashed with Palestinian forces in the south between 1979 and 1982 (Rami Siklawi, "The Dynamics of the Amal Movement in Lebanon 1975-90," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 34 (1), 2012: 4-26).

<sup>529</sup> Hanf 1993, pp. 282-93; Rabinovich 1985, pp. 174-5 and 179; O'Ballance 1996, pp. 137-8; Abraham 1993, p. 175; Rabil 2003, p. 73-5. The withdrawal of the French and US peacekeeping contingents from Beirut in early 1984 in response to a campaign of suicide bombings launched by Shia militants had signaled the end of any residual hope that Amin Gemayel may have entertained about attracting decisive western military intervention in his support.

<sup>530</sup> Norton 1987, pp. 112-21; Augustus Richard Norton and Jillian Schwedler, "(In)security Zones in South Lebanon," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 23 (1), 1993: 61-79.

<sup>531</sup> A possible exception to this pattern is represented by the fight in the northern coastal city of Tripoli between Syrian forces and Alawite paramilitary groups, on the one hand, and Palestinian forces and the Sunni militia Taweed, on the other. Clashes occurred in early 1982 as Syria's attempt to consolidate its control of the city was resisted by the Palestinians and their allies (Hanf 1993, 253-5). Strictly speaking, however, this is not a case of on-side fighting as Syria is not a non-state actor involved in a fight against groups on the same side of the civil war.

<sup>532</sup> The absence of evidence about any emerging threat or rapid change in balance of power within the anti-Christian coalition also suggests that we should not see infighting motivated by window of vulnerability logic.



circumstances would have entailed a concrete risk of enabling a Christian victory in the civil war. In early 1984 the roles were reversed: the Christians were on the defensive, as the Progressive Socialist Party and Amal made significant military advances with Syrian support in the Chouf and west Beirut and Amal harassed Israeli forces in south Lebanon; under these circumstances, infighting among pro-Syrian groups would have entailed substantial costs in terms of forgone opportunities to make gains against the Lebanese Forces and the Lebanese government. Moreover, my argument suggests that the fact that the pro-Syrian coalition was composed of non-coethnic organizations would significantly reduce the prospective benefits of infighting in terms of threat reduction and resource accumulation.

***Phase five: “Deep stalemate” and inter-ethnic rebel wars (1985-1989)***

After the pro-Syrian alliance’s takeover of west Beirut, several episodes of on-side fighting occurred. In 1985 the Shia Amal and the Druze Progressive Socialist Party ganged up against the Sunni Mourabitoun militia – their erstwhile ally against government forces. Then, after wiping out the group, Amal turned on the Progressive Socialist Party, while also battling PLO’s forces trying to re-establish a presence in west Beirut in the infamous “war of the camps.” In 1988-90 Amal and Hezbollah clashed for control over Lebanon’s Shias. Finally, an intra-Christian fight occurred in 1989 as the segment of the Lebanese army under the control of interim Prime Minister General Michel Aoun resorted to force to rein in the Lebanese Forces.

My argument cannot explain some of these episodes of infighting, as they occurred across, rather than within, ethno-sectarian lines. However, an examination of the circumstances surrounding these instances of on-side fighting allows me to identify more specific scope conditions for my argument. Below I show that this phase of Lebanon’s civil war was

characterized by what I call a “deep stalemate” between the main opposing coalitions – i.e., a situation in which neither side has a reasonable prospect of making significant gains on the battlefield, let alone achieve outright military victory. Under these circumstances, the structural forces envisioned by my theory are likely to be relatively weak and thus we should be more likely to observe episodes of inter-rebel war caused by other factors.

*Pattern of on-side fighting.* In 1985 the Shia Amal and the Druze Progressive Socialist Party engaged in a turf war against Sunni Mourabitoun for control of west Beirut, after the three of them jointly expelled the Lebanese army from the area in 1984. Amal appears to have been motivated by a desire to forestall the return of PLO’s forces in west Beirut, as Mourabitoun was closely associated with the Palestinians; Damascus supported Amal’s and the Progressive Socialist Party’s offensive, due to its concern about the prospect of renewed PLO’s influence in Lebanon.<sup>533</sup> After Mourabitoun’s demise in April, Amal attacked the Palestinian camps in Beirut, where the PLO had resumed a military presence. Some Palestinian positions fell quickly but others withstood ruthless siege tactics until the interposition of Syrian forces in late 1987. The Progressive Socialist Party provided support to the Palestinians and thus ended up fighting against Amal. After intermittent clashes, Amal took a beating at the hands of the joint forces of the Progressive Socialist Party and smaller Sunni-dominated groups and had to be rescued from the brink of defeat by Damascus, which redeployed in strength in west Beirut in 1987.<sup>534</sup>

---

<sup>533</sup> Tony Badran (2009, pp. 43-4) reports that the Progressive Socialist Party joined the fight on Amal’s side only when the latter experienced difficulties in defeating Mourabitoun (see also Norton 1987, p. 134); by contrast, Hanf (1993, p. 297) mentions an earlier clash between the Progressive Socialist Party and Mourabitoun in the summer of 1984. Amal had long held the PLO responsible for the suffering of Lebanon’s Shia population (caught in the crossfire between the Palestinian insurgents and Israel) and had repeatedly clashed with it in the south between 1979 and 1982 (Siklawi 2012; Joe Stork, “The War of the Camps, The War of the Hostages,” *MERIP Reports* 133, 1985; Norton 1987, pp. 85-7). It is less clear why the Progressive Socialist Party decided to side with Amal, but it seems plausible that Syria’s instigation played an important role.

Shortly after the end of Amal's siege of the Palestinian camps, a war erupted between the group and its Shia rival Hezbollah in the spring of 1988.<sup>535</sup> The "Party of God" had emerged as a coherent organization in the mid-1980s from the amalgamation of several pro-Iranian Islamist groups.<sup>536</sup> With its efforts to mobilize Lebanon's Shia community with a combination of a radical religious-ideological message, provision of social services and daring attacks against Israeli and western forces in the country, Hezbollah had started "gnawing at the support base of its main adversary, the Amal movement."<sup>537</sup> Several factors contributed to shield the fledgling organization from Amal's wrath until 1988. In 1982 and 1983, Syria and Iran enabled the groups that would later form Hezbollah to start organizing undisturbed in the Bekaa valley.<sup>538</sup> Then, from 1983 to 1988, Amal had its plate full fighting the Lebanese army (1983-1984), the Israeli occupying force (1983-1985), the Mourabitoun militia (1985), the Progressive Socialist Party and the PLO (1985-1987).

---

<sup>534</sup> Norton 1987, pp. 134-6; Hanf 1993, pp. 302-5 and 314-5; Picard 2002, p. 135; Winslow 1996, pp. 261-2; Siklawi 2012; Badran 2009, pp. 46-7.

<sup>535</sup> While there had been sporadic clashes from 1985, the "Shi'i civil war proper broke out April 1988" (Hanf 1993, p. 317).

<sup>536</sup> Augustus Richard Norton reports that "[a]lthough its leading members refer to 1982 as the year the group was founded, Hezbollah did not exist as a coherent organization until the mid-1980s. From 1982 through the mid-1980s it was less an organization than a cabal" (*Hezbollah: A Short History*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007, p. 34). See also Hala Jaber, *Hezbollah: Born with a Vengeance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), pp. 53-4 and 62.

<sup>537</sup> Eitan Azani, *The Story of the Party of God: From Revolution to Institutionalization* (New York: Palgrave, 2009), p. 63.

<sup>538</sup> Azani 2009, pp. 60-1; A. Nisar Hamzeh, "Lebanon's Hizbullah: From Islamic Revolution to Parliamentary Accommodation," *Third World Quarterly* 14 (2), 1993: 321-337 (in particular p. 322). Norton (1987, pp. 100-1) reports that, following Israel's 1982 invasion, Syria allowed the establishment of a 1,000-man contingent of Iranian Revolutionary Guards in the Bekaa both to fight Israel and to get Hezbollah off the ground; but as Damascus regained strength, it became more lukewarm towards the new organizations (see also Jaber 1997, p. 31; William Harris, "The View from Zahle: Security and Economic Conditions in the Central Bekaa 1980-1985," *Middle East Journal* 39 (3), 1985: 270-286, in particular p. 281).

As Eitan Azani notes, after the 1984 takeover of west Beirut, “Hezbollah still did not constitute a concrete threat for Amal” as the latter was at “the peak of its power.”<sup>539</sup> However, the long fight with the Progressive Socialist Party and the PLO weakened Amal politically and militarily vis-à-vis its coethnic rival: many cadres left the group in disgust with the assault on the Palestinians camps, while others were enticed by Hezbollah’s deep pockets, which enjoyed generous Iranian financial support.<sup>540</sup> When Amal eventually decided to use force, wiping out Hezbollah proved difficult. Amal had the upper hand in the initial battles in the south but its forces were defeated by Hezbollah in the southern suburbs of Beirut. After almost two years of inconclusive fighting punctuated by several ceasefires, the two groups reached an agreement with the mediation of Syria and Iran, permitting Hezbollah to return to the south to continue its struggle against Israel, while Amal demobilized in the context of the broader settlement of the Lebanese civil war with the Ta’if Accord (see below).<sup>541</sup>

While the Amal-Hezbollah war was raging, in 1989 the Christian heartland too was rocked by intra-ethnic fighting. As the Parliament failed to elect a successor for President Amin Gemayel, Lebanon found itself with two governments (and two armies) in late 1988: one was led by General Michel Aoun, nominated as interim prime minister by Amin Gemayel on the eve of the expiration of his term, and held sway in the Christian stronghold in central Lebanon; the other one, headed by Sunni former prime minister Salim al-Hoss, extended its authority over

---

<sup>539</sup> Azani 2009, pp. 63-4. Timur Goksel, the spokesperson of the UN peacekeeping mission in south Lebanon, offered a similar assessment of Amal’s initial view of Hezbollah: “Since 1985, Hizballah started to share Amal’s domination of the Shi’i community. Initially Amal did not care too much, as it was confident that it was untouchable. Amal did not pay a lot of attention to Hizballah as it did not think Hizballah was going to be well organized, active and a serious challenger” (reported in Siklawi 2012, pp. 20-1).

<sup>540</sup> Picard 2002, p. 136; Hanf 1993, p. 317; Azani 2009, pp. 73; Stork 1987; Siklawi 2012, p. 20.

<sup>541</sup> Siklawi 2012, pp. 21-2; Azani 2009, pp. 76-82; Dominique Avon, *Hezbollah: A History of the “Party of God”* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 36.

areas under Syrian control. In February, Aoun's forces and the Lebanese Forces clashed over control of lucrative custom posts; after heavy fighting, the Lebanese Forces caved in.<sup>542</sup>

Window theory sheds only limited light on the foregoing episodes of on-side fighting. The clashes pitting Amal and the Progressive Socialist Party against Mourabitoun and the Progressive Socialist Party and the PLO against Amal are clearly *not* predicted by my argument as they occurred between non-coethnic armed groups. By contrast, there is tentative evidence that the fights between Amal and Hezbollah and between the Lebanese Forces and Aoun's army are consistent with window theory: while there is little doubt that the armed groups in the two dyads had largely overlapping ethnic bases (Lebanon's Shias and Christians, respectively) and the other side in the broader civil war did not pose a serious threat (see discussion below about the overall battlefield stalemate), the information on the intra-ethnic balance of power and the initiators' decision-making process is very limited.

Amal's attack on Hezbollah may have plausibly been driven by a combination of window of opportunity and vulnerability logics. On the one hand, the group could marshal a much larger force than Hezbollah, but the fact that the former had not performed well on the battlefield in west Beirut over the previous years raises the possibility that it was in fact weaker in other dimensions of military power, for which I do not have specific information.<sup>543</sup> On the other hand, as noted, Amal had been experiencing a clear deterioration of its power position vis-à-vis its Shia rival. Thus hope of a cheap victory and anxiety about decline may have coexisted in the calculus of Amal's leadership. In the Christian camp, Aoun may have taken advantage of a window of

---

<sup>542</sup> Hanf 1993, pp. 572-3; Winslow 1996, pp. 271-2.

<sup>543</sup> Norton (1987, p. 101) reports that Hezbollah was "numerically inferior to Amal," which had a 5-1 advantage in Beirut (the same author estimates that at the end of the Lebanese civil war, Amal and Hezbollah had 6,500 and 3,500 fighters, respectively; Augustus Richard Norton, "Lebanon after Ta'if: Is the Civil War over?", *Middle East Journal* 45 (3), 1991: 457-473, p. 468).

opportunity, as he controlled more troops (15,000 men) than the Lebanese Forces (10,000), but there is little information about other dimensions of the balance of power (besides the fact that both sides possessed heavy weapons).<sup>544</sup>

*Refining the argument's scope conditions.* The limited fit of window theory in this phase of Lebanon's civil war raises the question of whether it is possible to identify specific features of the situation that could dampen the causal forces envisioned by my argument and could thus be considered as additional scope conditions. One such prominent feature was the existence of a situation of "deep stalemate" between the two opposing camps in the mid-1980s.

By 1984 it had become abundantly clear to observers and participants that "the Lebanese combatants were unable on their own to overrun each other and no single group was able to score a decisive victory;" a violent process of ethno-sectarian un-mixing had created broadly homogeneous "cantons" (next to areas dominated by Syria in the north and east and by Israel in the south) that could not be taken over by local opponents.<sup>545</sup> The static nature of the battlefield was largely due to its geography: much of the fighting took place either on mountainous terrain or in urban settings, which made it difficult to mount large-scale offensives with mechanized forces and facilitated defensive efforts.<sup>546</sup>

---

<sup>544</sup> Hanf 1993, pp. 572-4; Winslow reports a smaller numerical advantage for Aoun's forces (15,000 against 12,000 troops), which was, however, offset by the fact that his units controlled about twice as many heavy weapons (1996, pp. 276-7). An additional reason for caution in interpreting the intra-Christian fight as an instance of hegemonic bid concerns the ambiguous identity of Aoun's forces. My argument does not aim to explain the behavior of governments vis-à-vis pro-government militias; thus in as much as one accept General Aoun's claim to be the legitimate head of Lebanon's government (rather than just one of many militia leaders, as suggested by existence of another self-proclaimed pro-Syria government led by Salim al-Hoss exerting authority over much of the country's territory), the interaction between his army and the Lebanese forces should be considered beyond my theory's scope conditions.

<sup>545</sup> Badran 20009, pp. 36-7. The short-lived takeover of west Beirut by the Christian-dominated Lebanese army in 1983 represents the exception that confirms the rule as it occurred without active resistance of the Muslim population and militias, but was quickly reversed when Amal and other groups decided to rebel.

The external interveners could have in principle imposed a military solution by tilting the balance of power in favor of their local allies, but they were not willing to pay the corresponding political and military costs or were simply uninterested in the emergence of an undisputed winner of the Lebanese civil war. As Hanf observes, “[t]he cost in casualties of house-to-house fighting is always high. Facing cornered, desperate militias, the invading armies were soon made to realize that in Lebanon it would be exorbitant.”<sup>547</sup> Moreover, “the fear of a violent confrontation with the respective adversary’s foreign protector – or, as in the case of Israel in 1982, the political pressure of a superpower [the United States] that feared just such a confrontation – cautioned each to stay its hand.”<sup>548</sup> By 1984 there was little doubt about the fact that Syria preferred a negotiated solution of the civil war to an outright Christian defeat. In 1976 Damascus had saved the Christian militias from defeat at the hands of its erstwhile allies; similarly, in 1984, after the Christian President Amin Gemayel accepted its requests, Syria extended its support for him and its “anti-Christian” Lebanese allies toed the line by withdrawing the request for resignation and joining a national unity cabinet. As Hanf notes, “the Syrian government had again demonstrated that after the correction in foreign policy they had little interest in the ascendancy of one of the parties to the civil war. For the time being, there was a

---

<sup>546</sup> Hanf 1993, pp. 336-7. As the author puts it, “[t]he modalities of mountain and city warfare favour the defenders, even when they are vastly inferior in numbers and equipment, provided that they are determined to resist even at the cost of considerable destruction and civilian casualties...guerrillas, irrespective of militia, were superb defenders of their own, but poor invaders of others’ territory.”

<sup>547</sup> Hanf 1993, p. 338. As noted above, the Syrian army was unable to force the Christian militias to capitulate in 1979 and 1981; in 1982 the Israeli army coerced the PLO to evacuate its camps in west Beirut with siege tactics but hesitated to enter them for fear of heavy casualties.

<sup>548</sup> Hanf 1993, p. 324.

military stalemate. Neither the Druze-Shi'a coalition nor the Christians, nor the different parts of the army had any prospect of victory."<sup>549</sup>

In this situation of deep stalemate, where neither civil war coalition had any meaningful chance of achieving outright victory, the costs and risks involved in on-side fighting were relatively minor. When the powerful constraints to inter-rebel fighting represented by the possibility of inviting one's own destruction or forgoing opportunities to make significant strides towards victory are lifted, we should not expect on-side fighting to occur only in the presence of windows of opportunity and vulnerability – i.e., the prospect of even modest marginal gains (or idiosyncratic impulses like personality clashes and ideological disputes) may be sufficient to motivate on-side fighting in the context of very low costs.<sup>550</sup> To put it differently, the emergence of a deep stalemate radically reduces the degree of “compulsion” of the environment faced by civil war belligerents; the less the situation resembles a “house on fire”, the more variability in their behavior we should we should observe.<sup>551</sup>

### ***Phase six: The Damascus-imposed final settlement (1989-90)***

The deep stalemate came to an abrupt end in the spring of 1989. General Aoun's plan to re-establish the authority of the Lebanese state went far beyond reining in the Lebanese Forces. However, when it announced the closure of all illegal ports – the main source of revenues for the country's militias – the Progressive Socialist Party responded with force. Syria and the forces of

---

<sup>549</sup> Hanf 1993, p. 296.

<sup>550</sup> Jonah Schulhofer-Wohl (2013) advances a similar theoretical logic to make sense of on-side fighting in Lebanon and in the ongoing Syrian civil war.

<sup>551</sup> Arnold Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration: Essays on International Politics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1962), chapter 1; Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp. 19-21.



the al-Hoss government soon joined the fray. For much of the spring and summer, Beirut and the Christian stronghold were rocked by large-scale fighting and bombardment of an intensity not seen since the Israeli invasion in 1982.<sup>552</sup> Faced with the risk of the Christian enclave being overrun by the Damascus-led coalition, the Lebanese Forces fought alongside Aoun's despite their earlier clash.<sup>553</sup> As Hanf puts it, "Aoun's attempt to restore the Lebanese state had turned the demarcation lines into battle-fronts again."<sup>554</sup>

An Arab League-mediated ceasefire in August heralded a meeting of the members of the Lebanese Parliament in the Saudi city of Ta'if, where they voted a document of national reconciliation, envisioning a constitutional reform rebalancing the distribution of power among the country's ethnic groups and legalizing the Syrian presence (on terms dictated by Damascus). The Parliament then elected a new President whose cabinet was hailed as the legitimate executive by all parties except General Aoun.<sup>555</sup> As the Lebanese Forces had explicitly embraced the Ta'if peace process, Aoun found himself in complete isolation; instead of accepting offers to join the new cabinet, he reacted by attacking the Lebanese Forces in January 1990, engaging in an indecisive intra-Christian fight until May. After additional failed overtures to Aoun, in October the new Lebanese government authorized an all-out attack by Syria (with the support of the Lebanese Forces), which brought the General's defiance to an end. Thus, the fifteen-year civil war came to a conclusion; the national unity government and its foreign protector – Syria –

---

<sup>552</sup> Winslow 1996, pp. 272-3; Hanf 1993, pp. 573-81. It is not clear why Aoun decided to embark on a course of action that would predictably encounter the violent resistance of the much more powerful forces under Damascus' influence. Several observers (e.g., Hanf 1993, p. 577; Picard 2002, p. 139) have suggested that the General believed that the United States and France would eventually intervene militarily on his behalf.

<sup>553</sup> Hanf 1993, p. 598.

<sup>554</sup> Hanf 1993, p. 575.

<sup>555</sup> Winslow 1996, pp. 273-5; Hanf 1993, pp. 581-90 and 598.

whose forces would remain in Lebanon until 2005, could now focus their attention on the difficult tasks of disarming the militias and implementing the power-sharing deal struck at Ta'if.<sup>556</sup>

The absence of on-side fighting in this phase is consistent with window theory. As the stalemate gave way to a new bout of high-intensity fighting between the two civil war camps, the armed groups refrained from potentially costly on-side fighting; the clash between Aoun's army and the Lebanese Forces in early 1990 should not be considered an episode of on-side fighting as the latter had accepted the Ta'if agreement and recognized the new government, which squarely placed them in the anti-Aoun camp.

### *Alternative explanations and endogeneity*

The available evidence does not provide much support to alternative explanations of on-side fighting in the Lebanese civil war. Fotini Christia's minimum winning coalition (MWC) theory would predict on-side fighting to occur only when one armed group (or a coalition) is sufficiently strong to take on both its civil war opponent(s) and (at least some of) its erstwhile allies.<sup>557</sup> However, no organization was that powerful at any point during the war. The Phalanges, which launched a hegemonic bid in 1980, may have been the strongest militia at the time, but they controlled only a small portion of Lebanon's territory (see Map 5.2 below). Moreover, they were outnumbered by the combined forces of the opposing groups, which were comparably well-armed (not to mention the 30,000 heavily armed Syrian troops in Lebanon on

---

<sup>556</sup> Winslow 1996, pp. 276-82; Hanf 1993, pp. 599-621.

<sup>557</sup> Fotini Christia, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

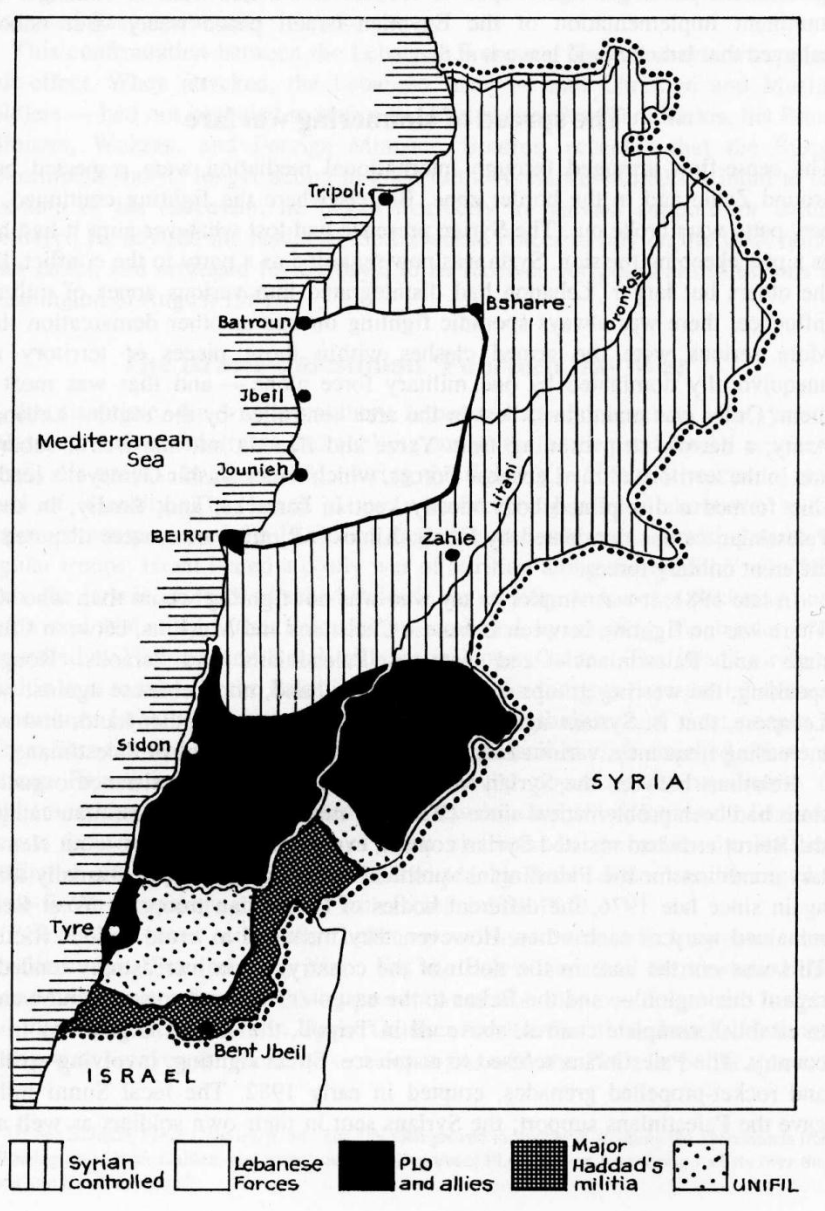
the side of National Movement from 1977).<sup>558</sup> In addition, MWC cannot explain why the intra-Christian fight occurred in 1980 but not in 1978, given that the balance of power in terms of number of fighters, armaments and territorial control was roughly the same throughout the period. MWC cannot predict any of the episodes of infighting after 1984 either; for example, Amal clearly was not stronger than the combined forces of the opposing Christian coalition and its erstwhile allies of the Progressive Socialist Party and Mourabitoun when it fought against them.

Armed groups' ideologies, organizational cohesion and leaders' personalities do not offer powerful alternative explanation either. The first episode of infighting occurred between Christian Maronite organizations with virtually identical political platforms and ideological outlooks; on the other hand, the opposing coalition was ideologically heterogeneous (as it comprised groups espousing a broad range of Pan-Arab and leftist views), but its members did not engage in large-scale infighting until 1985. The fight between Amal and Hezbollah provides the strongest case for ideological distance as a cause of on-side fighting, as the two groups emphasized their respective secular and Islamist positions when competing for the support of the Shia community both before and during their clashes. However, the effect of ideology cannot be empirically disentangled in this case from the one of coethnicity envisioned by my argument.

---

<sup>558</sup> Badran 2009, pp. 38-46; Khalidi 1979, p. 103; Hanf 1993, pp. 225-6; Robert Fisk, *Pity the Nation: The Abduction of Lebanon* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1990), pp. 86-7.

**Figure 5.2: Zones of Military Influence in Lebanon, 1976-1982**



Source: Hanf 1993, p. 254.

Bashir Gemayel's widely noted ambition may well have contributed to his decision to use force to gain control of the Christian camp and it is impossible to tell whether another leader in a similar position would have behaved differently, given the absence of challengers to the Lebanese Forces' hegemony after 1980. However, the fact that Bashir launched his hegemonic

bid only when the Syrian threat had clearly receded suggests, at a minimum, that his personal impulses were constrained by the threat environment he faced. Similarly, the Phalanges' (apparently high) organizational cohesion cannot explain the timing of attack, given the absence of any indication that it changed over time.<sup>559</sup>

An additional set of alternative explanations concerns the role of external interveners; Syria is of particular interest as it had an imposing military presence in Lebanon throughout the war. In theory, Damascus could have provoked on-side fighting indirectly, by manipulating armed groups' threat environment and thus creating windows of opportunity, or directly, by withholding punishment and promising rewards for infighting. However, the available evidence does not provide support for these arguments, as the window of opportunity exploited by the Phalangists in 1980 was not the product of Damascus' clever maneuvers. As noted, Syria had been experiencing international isolation and domestic unrest, which convinced it to lower its profile in Lebanon and redeploy its forces in the Bekaa valley, where they posed less of a threat to the Christian stronghold. It is plausible that Syrian encouragement contributed to Amal's and the Progressive Socialist Party's attacks on Mourabitoun in August 1984 and then to Amal's war against the PLO. As noted, the events occurred in a phase of deep stalemate, in which we should expect factors beyond my theory to have more of an influence on armed groups' behavior than in normal circumstances. However, it is unclear whether Syria in fact played a decisive role in shaping Amal's decisions – the latter had its own motives to fight Mourabitoun and the PLO, as it wanted to prevent a Palestinian return to west Beirut (and Mourabitoun was a PLO's ally). Finally, there is no indication that Syria played any role in instigating the fight between Amal

---

<sup>559</sup> I do not have enough information to assess whether the organizations in the comparatively peaceful opposing camp (the National Movement) differed from the Christian militias in terms of internal cohesion.

and Hezbollah; in fact Damascus and Tehran appeared to be at pains to restrain their respective local allies and were able to broker a ceasefire only after almost two years of clashes.<sup>560</sup>

### *Summary*

Window theory sheds much light on the complex relationships between the armed groups taking part in Lebanon's civil war. My argument explains the dynamics and timing of the Phalanges' hegemonic bid in 1980: the group attacked its weaker Maronite rival (the Tigers) when Syria did not pose an immediate threat, but eschewed such a course of action earlier, when the costs of infighting would have been much higher. As window theory would predict, in the same period the ethnically heterogeneous opposing coalition – the National Movement – did not experience major episodes of infighting. My argument cannot explain some episodes of on-side fighting in 1985-89, but neither can general alternative arguments.

### **3. Sri Lanka's Civil War (1983-2009)**

In 1983, a long-simmering Tamil rebellion in the north and east of Sri Lanka erupted into full-scale civil war, pitting the Sinhala-dominated government against five major Tamil insurgent groups: the Eelam Revolutionary Organization of Students (EROS), the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF), the People's Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam (PLOT), the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). All groups appealed to Tamil nationalism, with the first three also espousing a leftist agenda, while the LTTE and TELO had a more straightforward nationalist focus.<sup>561</sup> By

---

<sup>560</sup> Hanf 1993, pp. 317-8; Azani 2009, pp. 79-82.

1990, the LTTE emerged as the undisputed rebel hegemon, having wiped out or expelled from Tamil areas any potential challenger.

Over the years the Tigers gained a reputation as “one the world’s foremost paramilitary groups,” establishing exclusive control of large swaths of Sri Lankan territory, holding their own against Indian peacekeepers-turned-counterinsurgents deployed in 1987-90 and fighting the much larger government forces to a military stalemate until late 2006.<sup>562</sup> Then a much reinvigorated Sri Lankan army launched a major offensive and in the course of three years managed to annihilate the LTTE (in addition to massacring thousands of Tamil civilians in the process), which had been significantly weakened by an international crackdown of diaspora fundraising and a major organizational split.<sup>563</sup>

The pattern of inter-rebel war in Sri Lanka closely fits the predictions of window theory. “Gradually, the LTTE attempted to eliminate all the other groups as they were competing with the LTTE for a common pool of resources.”<sup>564</sup> The LTTE took advantage of windows of

---

<sup>561</sup> Paul Staniland, “Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Insurgent Fratricide, Ethnic Defection, and the Rise of Pro-State Paramilitaries,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56 (1), 2012a: 16-40; *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), p. 149-54. The rebel groups had distinct but highly overlapping social bases among Sri Lanka’s Tamil population; in fact, “[u]p to this time [1985] the Tamil population had hardly differentiated between rival groups. They were all referred to as boys and even Tigers.” University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna), *The Broken Palmyra*, Sri Lanka, 1990, ch. 5 (available at <http://www.uthr.org/BP/volume1/Chapter5.htm>, last accessed on January 19, 2015; UTHR(J) is a human rights organization that originated among professors in Jaffna).

<sup>562</sup> Brendan O’Duffy, “LTTE: Majoritarianism, Self-Determination, and Military-to-Political Transition in Sri Lanka,” in Marianne Heiberg, Brendan O’Leary and John Tirman, eds., *Terrorism, Insurgency, and the State: Ending Protracted Conflict* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), p. 257. See also Rohan Gunaratna, *Indian Intervention in Sri Lanka: The Role of India’s Intelligence Agencies* (Colombo: South Asian Network on Conflict Research, 1993), p. 411; and Stephen Hopgood, *Tamil Tigers, 1987-2002*, in Diego Gambetta, ed., *Making Sense of Suicide Missions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>563</sup> For analyses of the factors that may have contributed to the LTTE’s defeat, see Niel A. Smith, “Understanding Sri Lanka’s Defeat of the Tamil Tigers,” *Joint Forces Quarterly*, 59 (4), 2010: 40-4; and Ahmed S. Ashim, *When Counterinsurgency Wins: Sri Lanka’s Defeat of the Tamil Tiger* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), pp. 132-96.

<sup>564</sup> Gunaratna 1993 p. 411.

opportunity by attacking and dispensing of coethnic rivals in moments in which they were weak and the government posed a limited threat. By contrast, the Tigers refrained from launching a hegemonic bid in the early phases of the war, when they did not enjoy a clear military advantage over their rivals.

I break down the years of multi-party civil war in Sri Lanka (1983-90) in three phases, based on whether my argument's conditions for the occurrence of inter-rebel fighting were present or absent. In the first phase (1983-85), a roughly balanced distribution of power among the rebel groups prevailed, which did not warrant a hegemonic bid, in spite of the limited threat posed by the government. Consistent with my theory, there was no inter-rebel war. In the second phase (1986), the LTTE took advantage of its newly acquired military superiority and the continuation of limited government threat to sequentially wipe out or expel its rivals. In the third phase (1987-90), after resisting a large-scale government offensive and then the Indian army's counterinsurgency efforts, the Tigers managed to achieve complete hegemony of the Tamil movement by crushing their last remaining rival – the EPRLF – before the resumption of all-out war against Colombo.

### ***Phase 1: Early insurgency and inter-rebel cooperation (1983-85)***

Sri Lanka's ethnic civil war began in earnest in the summer of 1983, after over ten years of low-level militancy by several Tamil organizations.<sup>565</sup> The catalyst was an ambush by the LTTE against an army convoy in the north of the country in July. The attack sparked anti-Tamil pogroms throughout Sri Lanka, which in turn drove thousands of young Tamils into the rebels'

---

<sup>565</sup> For a detailed account of the sporadic attacks conducted by Tamil militants in the decade before 1983, see M.R. Narayan Swamy, *Tigers of Lanka, From Boys to Guerrillas* (Delhi: Konark Publishers, 1994), pp. 23-91. For an analysis of the outbidding dynamics between Sinhala political parties over the issue of language that brought about the Sinhala-Tamil conflict after Sri Lanka's independence, see Stanley Tambiah, *Sri Lanka: Ethnic Fratricide and the Dismantling of Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).



arms and prompted India to provide the militants with training, weapons and safe havens in the state of Tamil Nadu across the Palk Strait.<sup>566</sup> At long last, the Tamil rebels had the resources to launch a full-blown rebellion. “By the end of 1984, Jaffna [the northern insurgent stronghold] had become a war zone. . . at night, life came to a halt and the militants were in control.”<sup>567</sup> The influx of young men and Indian military support had dramatic effects: “training had changed all equations in Jaffna. Groups which had been virtually dormant or shown no special caliber for military operations were getting bloated.”<sup>568</sup>

The rebels held the military initiative in the first years of the war. They would launch deadly hit-and-run attacks on government forces (while not eschewing violence against Sinhala non-combatants) and the government would engage in reprisal killings of Tamil civilians pushing more young people in the insurgents’ ranks.<sup>569</sup> As Narayan Swami observes, the rebels “were harassing the Sri Lanka forces almost throughout the length and breadth of the sprawling northeast.”<sup>570</sup> By 1986 Jaffna was essentially a “liberated zone”, where government forces were bottled up in fortified bases and could move around only at the cost of provoking a major battle.<sup>571</sup> This pattern of fighting suggests a limited government threat. However, the other

---

<sup>566</sup> Swamy 1994, pp. 93-7; John Richardson, *Paradise Poisoned: Learning about Conflict, Terrorism and Development from Sri Lanka’s Civil Wars* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: International Center for Ethnic Studies, 2005), pp. 523-8; Hashim 2013, p. 88. Swamy (1994, p. 104) points out that none of the Tamil armed groups had more than 50 members before the onset of the war in 1983. Consistently, Brendan O’Duffy (2007, p. 257) reports that before the fateful ambush the LTTE consisted of “30 poorly armed dissidents.”

<sup>567</sup> Richardson 2005, p. 530.

<sup>568</sup> Swamy 1994, p. 109.

<sup>569</sup> Richardson 2005, pp. 530 and 545-6.

<sup>570</sup> Swamy 1994, p. 147.

condition for a rebel hegemonic bid – a marked inter-rebel imbalance of power – emerged only in 1986.<sup>572</sup>

In this phase, the LTTE and TELO, with roughly equal strength, towered above all other groups. TELO “alone could match the LTTE’s cadres and firepower, mainly due to the head start it had enjoyed with New Delhi’s initial generosity.”<sup>573</sup> The other groups suffered from a lack of weapons, poor internal cohesion or limited battlefield experience. As Swamy observes, “numerically, the PLOT, TELO, and LTTE had the maximum number of members, although the last two were better armed.”<sup>574</sup> PLOT’s lack of weapons was largely a function of its leadership’s inability to establish close relations with India.<sup>575</sup> Two additional difficulties bedeviled PLOT: limited battlefield experience (probably to some extent due to the lack of weaponry at its disposal) and serious problems of internal cohesion.<sup>576</sup> The other two armed groups – EROS and

---

<sup>571</sup> Swamy 1994, pp. 169-71; University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna) 1990. In the course of the year, government forces unsuccessfully tried several times to break the encirclement of their bases by the Tamil insurgent groups.

<sup>572</sup> This period was not characterized by a window of vulnerability either as there is no evidence of a clear trend in the inter-rebel balance of power or a mounting threat posed to a group by its rivals.

<sup>573</sup> M.R. Narayan Swamy, *Inside an Elusive Mind, Prabhakaran: The First Profile of the World's Most Ruthless Guerrilla Leader* (Delhi: Konark Publishers 2003), p. 132. Consistently, Ketheshwaran Loganathan (former EPRLF’s spokesperson) observes that “amongst the non-LTTE organizations, it was TELO, with a record of sensational attacks against the security forces that came anywhere close to matching LTTE’s prowess in the battlefield” (*Sri Lanka: Lost Opportunities, Past Attempts at Resolving Ethnic Conflict*, Colombo: Centre for Policy Research and Analysis, 1996, p. 119).

<sup>574</sup> Swamy 1994, p. 143.

<sup>575</sup> Swamy 1994, p. 178.

<sup>576</sup> Swamy 1994, pp. 179-82; Swamy 2003, p. 132; Ambalavanar Sivarajah, *Politics of Tamil Nationalism in Sri Lanka* (New Delhi: South Asian Publishers, 1996), pp. 134-5; Mark P. Whitaker, *Learning Politics from Sivaram: The Life and Death of a Revolutionary Tamil Journalist in Sri Lanka* (London: Pluto Press, 2007), pp. 92-5; Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam, *The Tamil Tigers: Armed Struggle for Identity* (Stuttgart, Germany: F. Steiner, 1994, pp. 42-3. Thus the observations that “[i]n early 1985, the P.L.O.T.E., L.T.T.E. and T.E.L.O. were considered fairly

EPRLF – could marshal a much smaller number of fighters and engaged in very limited military operations.<sup>577</sup>

Consistent with my argument, in the context of a rough balance of power between the LTTE and TELO, the former responded with uncharacteristic moderation (at least if one relies on the hindsight of its subsequent ruthless liquidation of rivals) to low-level clashes and accidents in which other Tamil organizations killed Tigers' cadres, limiting itself to retaliation in kind rather than unleashing the all-out attacks that characterize the following phase.<sup>578</sup>

### ***Phase 2: The Tigers attack (1986)***

The opportunity for the LTTE's hegemonic bid came in the spring of 1986. In March, tensions within TELO – the only organization that could match the Tigers' power at that time – exploded into open factional violence, bringing about “major upheaval” in the group.<sup>579</sup> Two factions, led by strongmen Das and Bobby, clashed against each other, with the latter's having the upper hand.<sup>580</sup> “Das was an able military man – and this faction was said to form the military backbone

---

evenly balanced” appears inaccurate (University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna) 1990). In fact, the same publication indirectly acknowledges PLOT's inferiority by pointing out that while “militarily the T.E.L.O. had come to rival the L.T.T.E.,” PLOT lacked battlefield experience and “[b]y mid-1986 the organisation had suffered from neglect from the leadership in India and was poorly armed.”

<sup>577</sup> As Swamy (1994, p. 104) puts it, EROS and EPRLF found themselves “plodding behind in the race for militant leadership.” Rohan Gunaratna reports that in early 1986 TELO had more fighters at its disposal than EROS and EPRLF combined (1993, pp. 140, 148 and 155). EROS “was largely seen as a group of intellectuals based in London” (Swamy 1994, p. 102) and “kept an extremely low profile,” focusing on terrorist attacks in the south rather than engaging the government forces in battle (Hellmann-Rajanayagam 1994, p. 81). The EPRLF too had largely been inactive on the battlefield until 1986 and was generally considered “militarily weak” (Swamy 1994, pp. 203 and 209).

<sup>578</sup> University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna) 1990.

<sup>579</sup> Swamy 2003, p. 135.

of the T.E.L.O.”<sup>581</sup> The LTTE took advantage of its rival’s moment of weakness by launching devastating attacks on TELO’s camps throughout Sri Lanka’s northeast in late April. It took the Tigers about one week to liquidate TELO.<sup>582</sup> “As Swamy points out, “[w]ith the demise of TELO, the bulk of the money raised by Sri Lankan Tamils abroad began flowing to the LTTE kitty. Recruits rushed to Tiger ranks, attracted by its awesome military operations, its army-like discipline and the aura of Prabhakaran [the LTTE’s leader].”<sup>583</sup>

The Tigers then turned their gun-sight on PLOT. An all-out attack proved unnecessary as after the LTTE killed or disarmed several of its members (including the group’s military commander in Jaffna) in a show of force, PLOT complied with the Tigers’ ultimatum to leave Jaffna in October.<sup>584</sup> The organization essentially imploded and ceased all military activities.<sup>585</sup>

The EPRLF’s turn came shortly afterwards. The group had conducted a number of operations against government forces in 1986 but was clearly outclassed by the Tigers in terms of manpower, battlefield experience and internal cohesion.<sup>586</sup> In December, with a lightning

---

<sup>580</sup> Swamy 1994, pp. 189-90.

<sup>581</sup> University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna) 1990.

<sup>582</sup> University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna) 1990; Swamy 1994, pp. 191-6.

<sup>583</sup> Swamy 2003, p. 143. We should not expect TELO’s relative decline to have prompted it to gamble for resurrection. As discussed in Chapter 2, when a group’s decline is due to problems of internal cohesion, its leadership would focus on organizational reforms or efforts to solidify its control of the organization rather than pick a fight with another group.

<sup>584</sup> Swamy 1994, pp. 207-9; Whitaker 2007, pp. 93-4.

<sup>585</sup> As Swamy (1994, p. 223) put it, by the end of the year, “PLOT had ceased to exist for all intents and purposes.” See also Hellmann-Rajanayagam 1994, p. 44.

attack the LTTE overran all EPRLF's camps in Jaffna in less than 24 hours; the group, however, managed to mount an effective resistance in the east, where it was relatively strong and then turned for protection to the Indian peacekeepers after their deployment in the spring of 1987.<sup>587</sup> The EPRLF got only temporary respite from the LTTE's wrath, as the Tigers "finished the job" when the Indian forces departed in late 1989-early 1990. As it sidelined its rivals, the "LTTE leaders began issuing public statements arrogating to their organisation sole authority to represent the Tamil people."<sup>588</sup>

In contrast with the treatment reserved to all other groups, the LTTE tolerated EROS – an extremely weak organization that quietly accepted the Tigers' hegemony. In fact EROS "acted more like an appendage" to the LTTE than an autonomous organization.<sup>589</sup> Subsequently, during the Indian peacekeeping mission, EROS did not engage in military operations but essentially functioned as an unofficial political front for the Tigers, by running for elections and making sympathetic public statements. Eventually EROS experienced a major split, with the main faction absorbed in the LTTE while the rest left the country.<sup>590</sup> Consistent with my argument, probably EROS's extreme weakness (it was the smallest group and had very little battlefield

---

<sup>586</sup> Swamy 1994, pp. 203 and 209; Gunaratna 1993, p. 147-9. For a discussion of the EPRLF's internal tensions leading to a split in 1986, see University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna) 1990.

<sup>587</sup> Swamy 1994, pp. 221-2.

<sup>588</sup> Richardson 2005, p. 531. As discussed in Chapter 2, my argument suggests that the EPRLF would perceive TELO's decline and the subsequent attack by the Tigers on this group as a window of vulnerability. However, according to window theory a hegemonic bid by the Tigers was more likely than a gamble for resurrection by the EPRLF: weaker groups typically would be reluctant to act until less risky paths out of their predicament have been ruled out and would tend experience collective action problems in mounting a joint attack (in this case, together with PLOT), which would be exasperated by the limited internal cohesion enjoyed by both groups, while the would-be hegemon would have an incentive to act swiftly.

<sup>589</sup> Swamy 1994, p. 223.

<sup>590</sup> Gunaratna 1993, p. 361.

experience) explains the LTTE's tolerance as the former did not represent a meaningful threat to the latter's hegemony.<sup>591</sup> As Paul Staniland puts it, "[EROS'] lack of large-scale activity or presence made its survival more acceptable to the LTTE since it could pose no real challenge."<sup>592</sup>

In addition to the emergence of a marked power imbalance in favor of the LTTE, the condition of a limited government threat continued to hold in this phase. The pattern of fighting described above, in which the "initiative lay with the militants," prevailed until Colombo launched its first major offensive in early 1987.<sup>593</sup> Moreover, in the course of 1986 the prospect of a sudden, radical escalation of the government's military effort likely appeared remote to the LTTE, as Colombo, under increasing diplomatic pressure from India, signaled willingness to find some form of negotiated solution addressing Tamil demands short of secession. In particular, each of the LTTE's attacks against its Tamil rivals coincided with Indian diplomatic initiatives towards which Colombo appeared pliant but that the Tigers ultimately resisted. The LTTE's attack against TELO occurred during a high-level meeting between Indian envoys and the Sri Lankan President on the Tamil issue, which had been announced a few weeks earlier.<sup>594</sup> The Tigers expelled PLOT from Jaffna during militant-government negotiations and in a context in which the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu was pressuring (ultimately unsuccessfully) the LTTE's leadership to meet Sri Lanka's President during a South Asian Association for Regional

---

<sup>591</sup> Both Swamy (1994, p. 186) and University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna) (1990) report that EROS was the smallest organization. However, I do not have detailed information on the number of EROS' fighters to conclusively say whether it fell below the threshold of extreme weakness of 3-1 numerical inferiority (see Chapter 2) vis-à-vis the rebel hegemon (the LTTE).

<sup>592</sup> Staniland 2014, p. 165.

<sup>593</sup> Richardson 2005, p. 545-6. See also Swamy 1993, pp. 202-3. For a discussion of the problems at the root of the Sri Lankan army's indecisive approach to counterinsurgency up to 1987, see Hashim 2013, pp. 90-3.

<sup>594</sup> Swamy 1994, pp. 190-1.

Cooperation summit in November 1986.<sup>595</sup> Finally, in the period leading to the attack on the EPRLF, the “L.T.T.E. and the government gave the impression that a move for a negotiated settlement was on” and a set of proposals, drafted with India's help, were announced by the government less than ten days after the Tigers’ onslaught.<sup>596</sup>

In sum, consistent with window of opportunity logic, “the LTTE always struck at the other organizations when they were weakened and preoccupied with internal rivalries,” while the government did not pose a serious and imminent threat.<sup>597</sup> The one feature of this phase of Sri Lanka’s civil war that does not fit my argument relates to the way in which the Tigers got rid of PLOT – a limited show of force, followed by PLOT’s decision to abandon the battlefield. The LTTE’s behavior is not surprising, as we should expect strong rebel groups to prefer to achieve hegemony without paying the cost of inter-rebel war; however, my argument suggests that rebel groups will typically not find a peaceful bargain that both sides prefer to war in the presence of windows due to pervasive commitment problems (i.e., the weaker group would generally prefer to fight against long odds to accepting complete submission to the hegemon).

### ***Phase 3: From India’s peacekeeping to LTTE’s hegemony (1987-90)***

In the third phase, the Tigers managed to withstand a large-scale government offensive and then an intense counterinsurgency campaign by the Indian army after its peacekeeping mission floundered in the face of the LTTE’s recalcitrance. Eventually, in the spring of 1990 the Tigers

---

<sup>595</sup> Swamy 1994, pp. 212-3; Loganathan 1996, pp. 108-15.

<sup>596</sup> University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna) 1990. See also Hellmann-Rajanayagam 1994, pp. 13-14 and Gunaratna 1993, pp. 164-5.

<sup>597</sup> Dayan Jayatilleka, *The Indian intervention in Sri Lanka, 1987-1990: The North-east Provincial Council and Devolution of Power* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: International Centre for Ethnic Studies, 1999), p. 21.

crushed their last remaining rival – the EPRLF – after the departure of its Indian protectors and before the resumption of the fight against Colombo, thus fully consolidating their control of Sri Lanka’s Tamil movement.

The circumstances leading to the first major government offensive in 1987 suggest that the LTTE may have miscalculated Colombo’s ability or willingness to escalate its hitherto limited military effort. In early 1987, as it was still fighting the EPRLF in the east following the late 1986 attack, the LTTE declared that it was taking over Jaffna’s civil administration and deployed uniformed policemen on the streets. The government responded to what it perceived as a blatant challenge to its sovereignty with an embargo on Jaffna and then a massive offensive. For the first time since the beginning of the war, the LTTE was under unrelenting government military pressure in the north, while continuing to clash with the EPRLF in the east. Loath of seeing the Tamil insurgency crushed, New Delhi imposed the India–Sri Lanka Accord on the belligerents in the summer of 1987, which envisioned the deployment of an Indian peacekeeping contingent to facilitate the disarmament of the insurgents as Colombo devolved power to the Tamil areas.<sup>598</sup>

The Tigers paid lip service to the agreement but took advantage of the respite in the fight against Colombo to reorganize and launch a surprise attack against the EPRLF in September 1987. As the LTTE kept dragging feet on the implementation of the agreement, New Delhi eventually decided to use force to bring the group to heel.<sup>599</sup> The Indian army’s belief that “the LTTE could be driven into a corner in 72 hours,” however, turned out to be ill-founded.<sup>600</sup> The

---

<sup>598</sup> University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna), 1990; S. D. Muni, *Pangs of Proximity: India and Sri Lanka’s Ethnic Crisis* (Oslo: PRIO, 1993); Swamy 1994, pp. 225-50.

<sup>599</sup> Swamy 1994, pp. 255-68; Loganathan 1996, pp. 126-34; Gunaratna 1993, pp. 236-40.



Tigers had to yield ground in the face of the Indian juggernaut's advance, but in doing so they denied a decisive battle to the counterinsurgent forces while inflicting heavy losses on them with skillful use of hit-and-run attacks and improvised explosive devices (IEDs).<sup>601</sup> The EPRLF, which had taken refuge in the Indian contingent's camps after the last LTTE's September attack, served as auxiliary force in New Delhi's counterinsurgency campaign.<sup>602</sup>

Eventually, a combination of LTTE's guerrilla warfare, Colombo's diplomatic pressure (spurred by a rebellion against India's presence among Sinhala ultra-nationalists in the south) and a change of government in New Delhi prompted the withdrawal of the Indian contingent from Sri Lanka's north-east in late 1989. As the Indians started leaving, the Tigers wiped out the EPRLF and rapidly consolidated their hold on the Tamil community. "The LTTE was in total control of northeastern Sri Lanka within a week of the departure of the Indian forces."<sup>603</sup> At that time, Colombo did not represent a threat for the Tigers, as it had been engaged in peace talks with them since the spring of 1989 and was waging a counterinsurgency campaign against the Sinhala nationalist JVP in the south while the Indian forces – which had come to be perceived by Sri Lanka's government as a major threat to its sovereignty – were still present on Sri Lanka's soil; in fact, the government provided military support for the LTTE's attacks on the Indians and the EPRLF. Having subdued all its Tamil competitors, the Tigers resumed their anti-government

---

<sup>600</sup> Swamy 1994, p. 270.

<sup>601</sup> Swamy 1994, pp. 271-80.

<sup>602</sup> Loganathan 1996, p. 139; Swamy 1994, p. 286. As Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam (1994, p. 121) observed, "the EPRLF could only survive with India's help."

<sup>603</sup> Gunaratna 1993, p. 391.

struggle in June 1990, much to Colombo's dismay, initiating what came to be known as "Eelam War II."<sup>604</sup>

In sum, the LTTE attacked its weaker coethnic rival EPRLF in moments of limited government threat – in September 1987, after the deployment of Indian peacekeeping force (before it turned on the Tigers) and in late 1989, as the Indians were withdrawing (the fighting between EPRLF and LTTE during the Indian campaign against the Tigers does not amount to inter-rebel war as the EPRLF operated as an auxiliary counterinsurgency force rather than a rebel group).

Consistent with my theoretical expectations, the LTTE did not experience any difficulty in exerting control on and mobilizing Sri Lanka's Tamil population after dealing with its competitors. As Staniland put it, "[o]nce rival organizations were broken, the civilian population faced fewer outside options and the Tigers were able to consolidate their hegemonic hold."<sup>605</sup> The Tigers absorbed some members of the defeated rivals in their rank-and-file but also killed many others considered irreconcilable.<sup>606</sup>

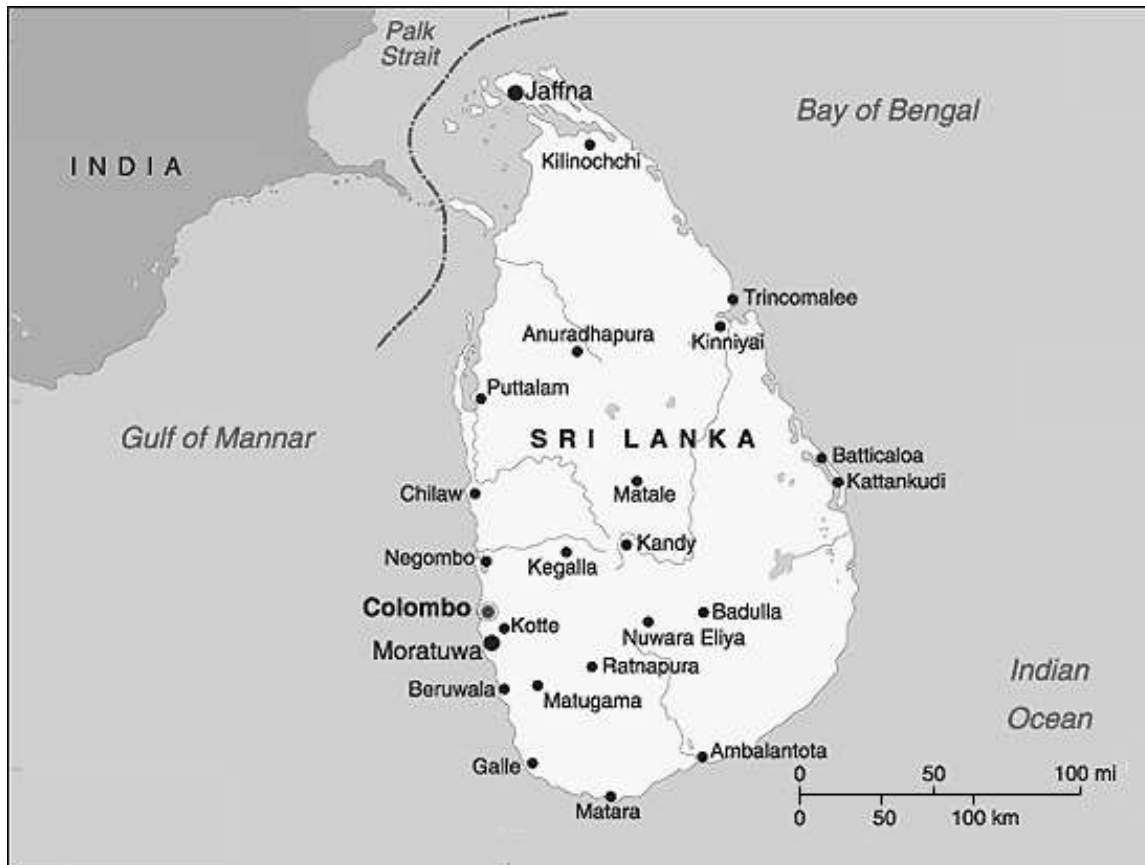
---

<sup>604</sup> William Clarence, *Ethnic Warfare in Sri Lanka and the UN Crisis* (London: Pluto Press, 2007), p. 54; Swamy 1994, pp. 300-19; Loganathan 1996, pp. 156-62; Gunaratna 1993, pp. 433-40.

<sup>605</sup> Paul Staniland, *Explaining Cohesion, Fragmentation, and Control in Insurgent Groups*, PhD Dissertation, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2010, p. 456. For similar observations, see, for example, Hellmann-Rajanayagam 1994, p. 1 and Swamy 2003, p. 211. For a detailed description of the state-like system of governance established by the LTTE in areas under its control, see Zachariah Cherian Mampilly, *Rebel Rulers: Insurgent Governance and Civilian Life During War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), pp. 108-13.

<sup>606</sup> For example, Swamy (1994, pp. 191-6) reports that many TELO members were hunted down by the LTTE after the group's defeat, but others were allowed to join the Tigers' ranks. The notion of cumulativeness of coethnic rebel groups' resources also allows us to make sense of the Tigers' request to PLOT, before its expulsion, to hand over to them 500 trained cadres that were based in Tamil Nadu waiting for deployment in Sri Lanka (Whitaker 2007, p. 95). Other groups appear to have fully realized the implications of the overlapping bases of support of Tamil insurgent organizations (albeit they may have been overoptimistic about their chances of success). In particular, TELO's leader is said to have claimed that "LTTE guerrillas would flock to the TELO if only the Tiger boss was done away with" (Swamy 2003, p. 133).

**Figure 5.3: Map of Sri Lanka**



*Alternative explanations and endogeneity*

The evidence presented above provides strong support for window theory of inter-rebel war.

Alternative explanations do not fare as well. Christia's minimum winning coalition (MWC) logic predicts inter-rebel war only when at least one rebel group is stronger than the government.

However, when it launched its hegemonic bid in 1986, the LTTE was clearly weaker than

Colombo in terms of territorial control and manpower. The Tamil groups had (almost) complete control only over the Jaffna peninsula, which is but a small part of Tamil inhabited areas of Sri Lanka (see Figure 5.3 above); moreover, in this phase the Tigers shared de facto sovereignty in

Jaffna with the other major rebel outfits.<sup>607</sup> In 1987 the LTTE had an estimated number of 3,000 fighters at its disposal, while the Sri Lanka's armed forces were several times as large.<sup>608</sup>

Analysts of the LTTE often hint at the personality of its leader – Velupillai Prabhakaran – as a key to understanding the group's behavior. For example, Swamy notes that “Prabhakaran orchestrated deadly action with ruthless efficiency,” which the author identifies as “his trademark.”<sup>609</sup> As Prabhakaran's group was the initiator in all episodes of inter-rebel war in Sri Lanka, it is not possible to rule out that his personality or military acumen may have played an important causal role. However, the fact that across the cases examined in this dissertation inter-rebel aggression occurred under a variety of leadership types casts doubts on the general validity of this kind of individual-level argument. In any case, leader characteristics may at best provide a partial explanation for the LTTE's behavior, as Prabhakaran's “ruthlessness” manifested itself only when his group was clearly stronger than the rivals. In the same vein, the widely noted high cohesion and discipline of the LTTE<sup>610</sup> may only offer a partial explanation of the pattern of inter-rebel war, as those were time-invariant features of the group while fighting occurred only in some phases.<sup>611</sup>

---

<sup>607</sup> Swamy 1994, p. 169. The rebel groups claimed (and the LTTE eventually controlled) much larger swaths of Tamil inhabited territory than the Jaffna peninsula as the Tamil homeland.

<sup>608</sup> The LTTE's figure is from Swamy 1994, p. 280. *The Military Balance* reports the overall size of Colombo's armed forces at 48,000 (40,000 in the army, including active reservists) (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1986-1987). No information is available on the number of Sri Lanka's troops deployed in Tamil areas, but they are likely to have constituted a large share, given that the country was not involved in other military operations. Richardson (2005, p. 528) reckons that the combined strength of all Tamil rebel groups in 1986 was comparable to Sri Lanka's army, which implies that the Tigers commanded about one third of the number of government soldiers (as LTTE, TELO and PLOT were the largest groups and were of similar size).

<sup>609</sup> Swamy 2003, pp. 200 and 135. See also Gunaratna 1993, pp.403-12.

<sup>610</sup> E.g., Staniland 2014.

A different set of alternative explanations would focus on India's involvement in Sri Lanka's civil war. New Delhi clearly played a crucial role in getting the Tamil insurgency off the ground by providing generous support to several fledgling rebel groups; but India does not appear to have instigated inter-rebel war, which in fact occurred in spite of New Delhi's efforts to induce inter-rebel cooperation.<sup>612</sup> However, Indian intervention may have contributed to inter-rebel fighting in indirect and unintended ways. Stephen Hopgood (2005), for example, contends that Indian support for Tamil insurgents ended up fueling inter-rebel competition for outside aid and thus conflict; others suggest that the Tigers attacked TELO because they perceived the latter as an Indian stooge.<sup>613</sup> These arguments about how India's intervention may have contributed to inter-rebel war are *prima facie* plausible (although I did not come across any concrete evidence) but do not constitute distinct alternative explanations. The idea that external support to a coethnic rival could affect rebel groups' threat perception and factor in their decisions to use force is fully consistent with window theory. The theory would be contradicted only if external intervention tended to spur inter-rebel war in the absence of windows of opportunity and vulnerability or if windows of opportunity and vulnerability in the absence of external intervention did not typically lead to inter-rebel war. Neither is the case in Sri Lanka. The Tigers targeted TELO in

---

<sup>611</sup> The relative degree of group cohesion is indeed an important part of the explanation of the Tigers' behavior – the LTTE attacked its rivals when they were immersed in internal strife – but this is fully consistent with window theory, which identifies organizational cohesion as one of the constitutive elements of the inter-rebel balance of power.

<sup>612</sup> As Richardson (2005, p. 528) notes, "RAW's [Research and Analysis Wing, India's external intelligence agency] strategy was to maintain control by preventing any one group from becoming dominant." As part of this strategy, RAW arm-twisted the Tigers into joining the Eelam National Liberation Front (ENLF), an umbrella organization composed of TELO, EROS and EPRLF (Swamy 1994, p. 143; Swamy 2003, pp. 119-20). Sri Lanka's intelligence operatives too "assessed that RAW was not behind LTTE plans to achieve total control of the political, economic and social life in the Jaffna peninsula. They also assessed that RAW had not encouraged LTTE to eliminate rival groups" (Gunaratna 1993, p. 166).

<sup>613</sup> E.g., Swamy 1994, p. 330.

1986, when the latter was engulfed in internecine strife, but abstained from large-scale violence against it earlier, when the balance of power was not favorable. After crushing TELO, the LTTE expelled PLOT from Jaffna, even if the group had not managed to attract Indian support.<sup>614</sup>

A final set of alternative explanations concerns the role of the incumbent in provoking inter-rebel war. Unlike in the Iraq and Ethiopia cases, there is no evidence that the Tamil insurgent groups feared that their rivals may reach a separate deal with Colombo at their expense or that the government tried to drive a wedge between its opponents by playing up these kinds of fears.<sup>615</sup> On the other hand, it is plausible that the fact that that EPRLF served as an auxiliary force for New Delhi's counterinsurgency campaign in 1987-1989 factored in the LTTE's decision to wipe out its rival after the departure of the Indian contingent. However, the Tigers had attacked the EPRLF in 1986, before India's deployment in Sri Lanka was a concrete possibility, and the EPRLF's decision to side with India was largely due to its desperate need for protection from the LTTE.<sup>616</sup>

This discussion about the potential impact of counterinsurgency policies on inter-rebel war points to questions about the endogeneity of the window of opportunity discussed above, given that one of its constitutive elements is the level of threat posed by the government. As noted in other chapters, the problem is not the fact that the hypothesized causes of inter-rebel war are themselves caused by some other factor (they are not supposed to be "unmoved movers"),

---

<sup>614</sup> Swamy 2003, p. 91; Muni 1993, p. 67.

<sup>615</sup> Muni (1993, p. 67) is the only source reporting that in 1985 PLOT struck an agreement with Colombo to find a negotiated settlement and fight other Tamil organizations. As noted in Chapters 3 and 4, in any case the mere fact of fears of defection to the government affecting rebels' threat perception and thus contributing to motivate inter-rebel war is fully consistent with my argument. Window theory would be falsified only if fears of defection (whether arising spontaneously or through government manipulation) were sufficient to cause inter-rebel war, regardless of the presence of windows of opportunity or vulnerability.

<sup>616</sup> Hellman-Rajanayagam 1994, p. 121; Staniland 2012a.

but rather that windows of opportunity could be just the last link in a longer and more complex causal chain, not captured by my theory. If windows of opportunity are systematically engineered by governments (for example, by refraining from bringing to bear their full offensive power on the insurgents), my argument could be ignoring a key factor underlying government decision-making, thus missing an important part of the explanation of inter-rebel war. However, the available evidence does not suggest that Colombo cleverly manipulated the insurgents' threat environment to spur the Tigers to attack their rivals, but rather that it took advantage of ongoing infighting. The Sri Lankan government's initial limited response to the Tamil insurgency was largely a function of "severe structural and organizational problems in the military," which took time to overcome.<sup>617</sup> What the government did do was opportunistically refraining from doing anything to stop inter-rebel war, so that the insurgents would continue to bleed each other white, while it organized its forces for an intensification of the counterinsurgency campaign.<sup>618</sup>

### ***Summary***

Window of opportunity logic offers a powerful explanation for infighting among Sri Lanka's Tamil insurgent groups. The Tigers attacked their coethnic rival organizations when a favorable imbalance of power prevailed and neither government forces nor the Indian military contingent posed an imminent threat to the group. From its hegemonic position, the LTTE managed to rally the Tamil population to its side and pose an even more serious challenge to Colombo's authority than in the previous years.

---

<sup>617</sup> Hashim 2013, pp. 90-2. See also Raj Vijayasiri, "A Critical Analysis of the Sri Lankan Government's Counterinsurgency Campaign," Master Thesis, Command and Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 1999.

<sup>618</sup> "All this time [during the LTTE-TELO fight] the Sri Lankan army had remained quiet except for a bit of helicopter firing here and there (University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna) 1990).

#### 4. Syria's Civil War (2011-)

The Syrian civil war started in the summer of 2011, as peaceful protests turned to violent resistance in the face of Damascus' brutal repression. The first groups to take the field were mostly formed by local volunteers and army deserters, and operated under the loosely knit umbrella of the Free Syria Army (FSA). Jabhat al-Nusra – al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate – and host of Islamist organizations followed suit in early 2012.<sup>619</sup> The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) joined the fray in 2013 by crossing into Syria from Iraq.<sup>620</sup> The conflict has taken on ethno-sectarian dimension from the beginning, with an overwhelmingly Sunni insurgency pitted against Bashar al-Assad's Alawite regime, supported by its Shia allies Hezbollah and the Iraqi and Iranian governments.<sup>621</sup>

The analysis below provides preliminary support for window theory. In the first two years of the war, the myriad Sunni insurgent groups intensely competed for resources and recruits but refrained from inter-rebel war; this is consistent with window theory as a roughly balanced distribution of power among rebel groups would make a hegemonic bid prohibitively costly, while the absence of a marked power trend in favor of any organization or a mounting

---

<sup>619</sup> International Crisis Group, "Tentative Jihad: Syria's Fundamentalist Opposition," *Middle East Report* 131, 2012, pp. 1-2; Elizabeth O'Bagy, "The Free Syrian Army," *Middle East Security Report* 9, Institute for the Study of War, 2013; Valerie Szybala, "Al-Qaeda Shows Its True Colors in Syria," *Backgrounders*, Institute for the Study of War, 2013a.

<sup>620</sup> Ahmed S. Hashim, "The Islamic State: From al-Qaeda Affiliate to Caliphate," *Middle East Policy* 21(4), 2014: 69-83; Andrew W. Terrill, "Confronting the 'Islamic State': Understanding the Strengths and Vulnerabilities of ISIS," *Parameters* 44 (3), 2014:13-23. ISIS is variously referred to as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, from its Arabic name al-Dowla al-Islamiya fil-Iraq wal-Sham) and the Islamic State (IS, per its 29 June 2014 communiqué declaring the establishment of the Islamic Caliphate).

<sup>621</sup> Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (New York: Regan Arts, 2015), pp. 132-42. For information on the Syrian opposition's ideological spectrum, see, among others, International Crisis Group 2012 and Afshon Ostovar and Will McCants, "The Rebel Alliance: Why Syria's Armed Opposition Has Failed to Unify," CNA Research Memorandum, CNA Analysis & Solutions, 2013 (available at <https://www.cna.org/research/2013/rebel-alliance>, last accessed on June 10, 2015).



threat to a specific group did not warrant a gamble for resurrection. ISIS' arrival to Syria disturbed this equilibrium: as the group experienced rapid growth, other organizations came to see it as a serious threat and decided to attack as window of vulnerability logic would lead us to expect. However, ISIS survived the rebel onslaught and, after acquiring significant amounts of resources in Iraq, it went on the offensive against the rest of the insurgent movement in 2014-15. This subsequent behavior seems consistent with window of opportunity logic, as the group had probably gained a marked military edge over rival groups while a weakened Syrian government devoted most of its military assets to fighting other insurgents groups.

The case study is divided in three parts, based on the presence or absence of theoretical conditions for inter-rebel war.

### ***Phase 1: Early insurgency and absence of inter-rebel war (2011-13)***

From the rebellion's onset the anti-government forces have been highly fractionalized, with hundreds of groups struggling to coordinate operations and often competing over recruits, weapons and external support.<sup>622</sup> In the course of the first two years of the civil war, a number of localized clashes and skirmishes occurred between rebel groups; however, no episode of large-scale fighting took place.<sup>623</sup> As the International Crisis Group noted in an October 2012 report, "when it comes to fighting the regime, opposition groups of all stripes have been relatively successful in putting differences aside. Though some reports of clashes between FSA and jihadi

---

<sup>622</sup> See, for example, Jeffrey White, Andrew J. Tabler and Aaron Y. Zelin, "Syria's Military Opposition: How Effective, United, or Extremist?," *Policy Focus* 128, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2013; Joseph Holliday, "Syria's Maturing Insurgency," *Middle East Security Report* 5, 2012. Jeffrey White classifies Syria's rebel groups into "territorial battalions" (local and independent units, primarily concerned with operations in their own areas) and "composite brigades" (larger formations with greater capabilities and operating over broad areas) ("The Military Opposition on the Ground," p. 8, in White, Tabler and Zelin 2013).

<sup>623</sup> International Crisis Group 2012, pp. 12-19; Holliday 2012, pp. 27-8; International Crisis Group, "Syria's Metastasising Conflicts," *Middle East Report* 143, 2013a; O'Bagy 2013.

militants have surfaced, for now such incidents appear isolated and do not appear to have stymied the broader trend toward collaboration across ideological lines.”<sup>624</sup> A similar overall cooperative trend was evident across Syrian through the summer of 2013.<sup>625</sup>

The absence of inter-rebel war in this period is consistent with window theory: Syria’s Sunni insurgent groups were coethnic but faced no window of opportunity, due to a balanced distribution of power among them and the intensity of the fight against the government; similarly, probably there was no window of vulnerability, in the absence of a clear trend in the balance of power or a mounting threat posed by some groups to others.

The existence of overlapping bases of support among Syria’s Sunni insurgents is well illustrated by the fluidity of their memberships. As the International Crisis Group reported, “[n]ewly-minted guerrilla fighters tend to flock to whatever group has more guns and bullets, irrespective of its ideological leaning; offers superior opportunities for personal enrichment; or, in contrast, enjoys the most impeccable reputation. In the countryside, ‘battalions’ often chiefly comprise relatives who commute between the front line and their homes. Cousins from a single extended family in different parts of Aleppo joined various groups for the simple reason that they all needed income and gravitated toward whatever they could find.”<sup>626</sup>

Inter-rebel war could have thus brought about significant benefits in terms of acquisition of resources under the control of rivals and elimination of threatening competitors, but would have also entailed prohibitively high costs. In fact, there was no clear hierarchy of power among

---

<sup>624</sup> International Crisis Group 2012, pp. 22.

<sup>625</sup> Isabel Nassief, “Syria’s Southern Battlefield,” *Backgrounder*, Institute for the Study of War, 2013; Isabel Nassief, “The Campaign for Homs and Aleppo,” *Middle East Security Report* 17, 2014; International Crisis Group, “Rigged Cars and Barrel Bombs: Aleppo and the State of the Syrian War,” *Middle East Report* 55, 2014a.

<sup>626</sup> International Crisis Group 2013a, p. 8. See also International Crisis Group 2012, p. 6.

the myriad rebel groups operating across Syria, which ruled out the prospect of a quick and cheap fight for any organization. While several “mainstream” rebel groups affiliated with the Free Syrian Army could marshal larger numbers of fighters, Salafi-jihadist groups tended to be better armed and display higher levels of battlefield proficiency.<sup>627</sup> For example, an official of al-Towhid – the largest group near Aleppo affiliated with the Free Syrian Army – observed: “Al-Nusra in Aleppo is much smaller than us numerically, but what it lacks in numbers it makes up for in the capabilities of its fighters, and the fact that they are willing to do martyrdom attacks [suicide bombings]. Given the limited weapons we have, there are instances when we need a martyrdom attack, and they provide it. But al-Nusra isn’t big enough to win battles on its own; rather groups like us provide the numbers, and they provide what you might call the elite forces.” This rough balance of power seems to have induced inter-rebel cooperation, as the International Crisis Group’s report cited above notes:

“Most established rebel formations possess sufficient resources to endure but are not strong enough to either fully absorb similar-sized groupings or shun alliances with them. At the same time, more radical Islamist factions are powerful enough to carry on, yet increasingly feel the need to reach out to mainstream combatants as opposed to antagonizing them.”<sup>628</sup>

The fact that the insurgents were engaged in a high-intensity fight with the government throughout this period would also lead us to expect an absence of inter-rebel war. After being almost crushed by the government in early 2012, the rebels made rapid gains in the second half

---

<sup>627</sup> International Crisis Group 2012, pp. 21-2; O’Bagy 2013, p. 32; White 2013, pp. 10-11.

<sup>628</sup> International Crisis Group 2012, p. 22.

of the year and in early 2013; the Assad regime then bounced back from the brink of defeat in the spring of 2013 with the infusion of men and material from Hezbollah, Iran and Russia, and launched a series of successful offensives.<sup>629</sup> By engaging in infighting the rebels would have exposed themselves to the risk of defeat when under government military pressure or paid a high opportunity cost in phases in which they were making significant headways on the battlefield.

### ***Phase 2: ISIS' rise (2013-14)***

ISIS' entry on the Syrian scene in the spring of 2013 sent shockwaves across the insurgent movement, eventually bringing about all-out inter-rebel war. In the summer of 2011, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI, the "successor" of al-Qaeda in Iraq) dispatched operatives to Syria to create a new jihadi organization – al-Nusra – with the support of al-Qaeda Central's head, Ayman al-Zawahiri. In April 2013, ISI's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced the merge of his group and al-Nusra into ISIS. After initial hesitation, Al-Nusra's leadership, backed up by al-Zawahiri, rejected the initiative reasserting its independence.<sup>630</sup>

Despite tensions and occasional skirmishes, al-Nusra cooperated with ISIS against the government until early 2014, and so did most independent Salafi groups and organizations affiliated with the Free Syrian Army.<sup>631</sup> The one exception to this pattern is the fight between ISIS and the Free Syrian Army's affiliate Northern Storm for control of Azaz, a town on the

---

<sup>629</sup> White 2013, pp. 3-7; Nassief 2014, p. 39.

<sup>630</sup> Hashim 2014; Terrill 2014; Aaron Y. Zelin, "The War between ISIS and al-Qaeda for Supremacy of the Global Jihadist Movement," *Research Notes*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2014; Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "The Dawn of the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 16, Hudson Institute, 2014a; International Crisis Group 2014a, pp. 5-6.

<sup>631</sup> Szybala 2013a; Valerie Szybala "The Islamic Alliance Emerges," *Backgrounders*, Institute for the Study of War, 2013b; Nassief 2014, pp. 26-35; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Special Report: Northern Storm and the Situation in Azaz (Syria)," *Middle East Review of International Affairs/MERIA Journal* 28 (4), 2014b.

border with Turkey, in September 2013.<sup>632</sup> Salafi and “mainstream” groups continued to coordinate their anti-regime operations with ISIS for the remainder of 2013. Then in early January a broad array of rebel forces launched all-out surprise attacks against ISIS on multiple fronts in northern and eastern Syria.<sup>633</sup> The group lost large swaths of territory under its control in Aleppo and Idlib provinces, but within a few weeks managed (in part thanks to reinforcements coming from Iraq) to regroup and established its dominance on Raqqa – soon to become the “capital” of the self-proclaimed state (see Figure 5.4). Inter-rebel fighting has caused thousands of rebel deaths and continues at the time of this writing (June 2015), with ISIS making substantial territorial gains on both sides of the Iraq-Syria border and intensifying the pressure on other Syrian insurgents groups around Aleppo, stretched thin in their simultaneous fight against government forces.<sup>634</sup>

While window theory cannot explain all the twists and turns of these inter-rebel dynamics, it offers useful lenses to make sense of some broad patterns. In particular, the early 2014 rebel attack against ISIS appears like a textbook instance of gamble for resurrection in the face of a window of vulnerability. As Rand analyst Brian Jenkins noted, after having discussed

---

<sup>632</sup> Zeina Karam and Bassem Mroue, “Al-Qaida Militants Capture Town in Northern Syria,” *Associated Press*, 19 September, 2013 (available at <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/jihadis-capture-northern-syrian-town-near-turkey>, last accessed on June 13, 2015); “Syrian Rebel Factions Tell Al Qaeda Groups to Withdraw,” *France24*, 3 October, 2013 (available at <http://www.france24.com/en/20131003-syrian-rebels-tell-qaeda-groups-withdraw-homs-isil-azaz/>, last accessed on June 13, 2015).

<sup>633</sup> Charles C. Caris and Samuel Reynolds, “ISIS Governance in Syria,” *Middle East Security Report 22*, Institute for the Study of War, 2014, pp. 12-13; International Crisis Group 2014a, pp. 10-2. The anti-ISIS forces included, among others, al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, Liwa al-Tawhid, Saqour al-Sham and several smaller Free Syrian Army-linked units.

<sup>634</sup> Anne Barnard, “Dual Threat Has Mainstream Syrian Rebels Fearing Demise: Facing Both ISIS Militants and Bashar al-Assad’s Forces in Syria,” *New York Times*, 15 August, 2014; Jeffrey White, “ISIS, Iraq, and the War in Syria: Military Outlook,” *Policywatch* 2273, 2014; Patrick Cockburn, “ISIS Consolidates,” *London Review of Books* 36 (16), 2014: 3-5.

other possible causes of the rebel attack on ISIS, “[p]erhaps a bigger factor fueling the conflict among Syria’s Islamists has been the growing strength and predominance of ISIL...ISIL’s rapid growth threatened the other rebel groups who became increasingly concerned that it would come to dominate the rebellion while following its own agenda.”<sup>635</sup> ISIS had in fact been expanding rapidly since its debut on the Syrian battlefield in the spring of 2013, as the International Crisis Group pointed out:

“By the end of 2013, IS had grown to become one of the most powerful factions in rebel-held areas, evoking respect, fear and animosity among other anti-regime militants. It was able to do so due to superior planning, organising, funding and combat capacities in large part provided by its core of seasoned non-Syrian jihadis and base in Iraq.”<sup>636</sup>

Other insurgent groups heatedly debated (both within and between organizations) the trade-off between the long-term risk posed by a growing ISIS and short-term benefits of its significant contribution to the fight against the Assad regime.<sup>637</sup> For example, an Ahrar al-Sham fighter observed: “We need to fight them [ISIS] now, because if we don’t, then by the time the regime falls they will have taken over;” but he also admitted that his organization continued to coordinate with ISIS on the battlefield because of its tactical contributions.<sup>638</sup> A general

---

<sup>635</sup> Brian Michael Jenkins, “Brothers Killing Brothers: The Current Infighting Will Test al Qaeda's Brand,” *Perspective*, RAND Corporation, 2014 (available at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE123>, last accessed on June 15, 2015).

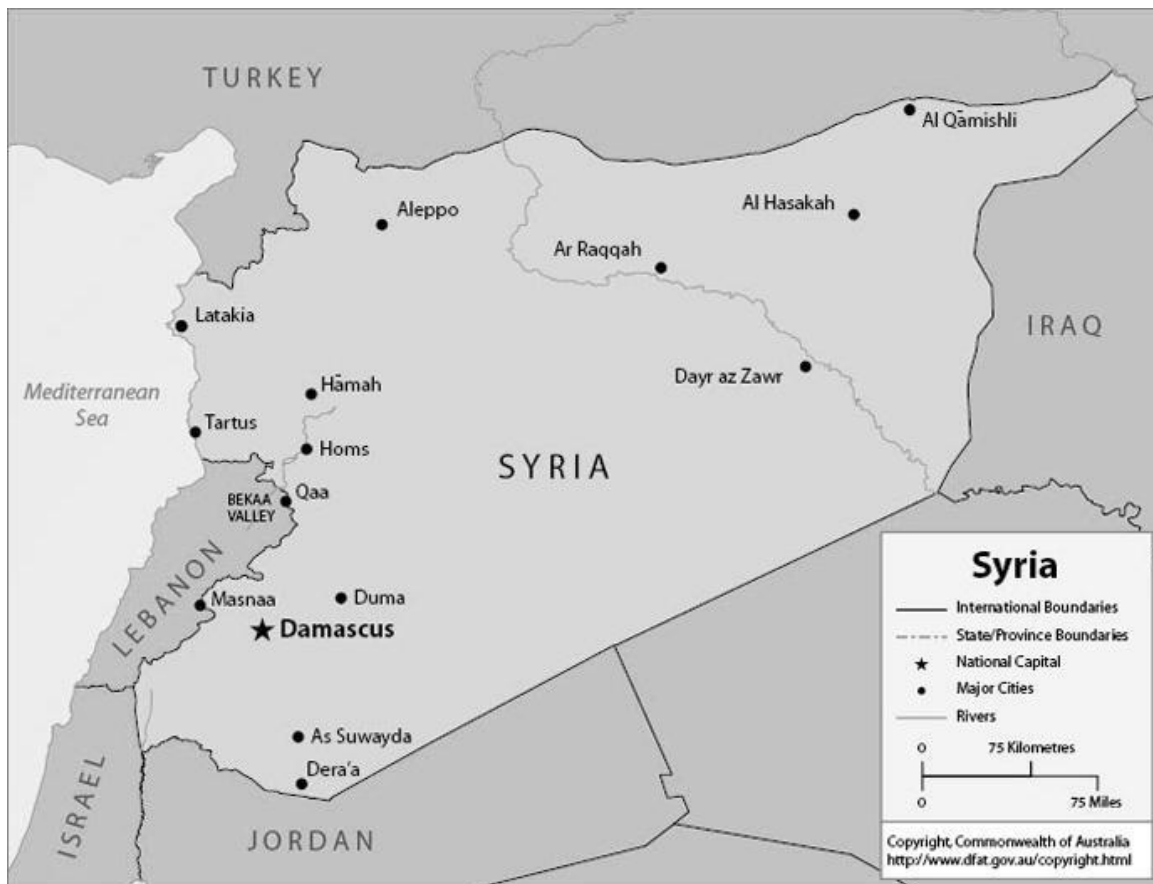
<sup>636</sup> International Crisis Group 2014a, p. 5.

<sup>637</sup> International Crisis Group 2014a, pp. 6 and 10 (interviews with Liwa al-Towhid, Ahrar al-Sham, Saqour al-Sham and Jaish al-Islam officials, conducted in Gaziantep, Istanbul and Reyhanli, Turkey, in March-June 2014).

<sup>638</sup> International Crisis Group 2014a, p. 7 (interview conducted in November 2013 in Kilis, Turkey).

agreement about the need to use force to deal with the rise of ISIS emerged only gradually in the insurgent movement, allowing the group's growth to continue unabated until the end of 2013.<sup>639</sup>

**Figure 5.4: Map of Syria**



The insurgents' reluctant attack on ISIS is consistent with window of vulnerability logic, as the strength of the group and the intensity of government military operations in northern Syria all but guaranteed that inter-rebel war would be a costly and risky affair. It is unlikely (but it

<sup>639</sup> Interestingly, ISIS' spokesman, Abu Mohammed al-Adnani, provided an interpretation of the attack consistent with window of vulnerability logic, as he said in an audio clip posted online that his group's rivals tried to defeat it "when they saw it was getting more powerful" ("ISIL Says It Faces War with Nusra in Syria," *Al Jazeera*, 8 March, 2014, available at <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/03/isil-says-it-faces-war-with-nusra-syria-20143719484991740.html>, last accessed on June 14, 2015)

cannot be ruled out, in the absence of direct decision-making evidence) that the anti-ISIS forces thought they could quickly and cheaply dispose of their target: the number of ISIS fighters in Syria – estimated at between 3,000 and 8,000 – was just a small fraction of the overall insurgent movement – around 100,000 fighters; however, ISIS had displayed exceptional battlefield effectiveness against government forces in the previous months, was well-armed and had deep pockets.<sup>640</sup> Moreover, the anti-ISIS coalition was bound to experience collective action problems and coordination difficulties, which would partially offset its numerical advantage.<sup>641</sup> In any case, even a quick victory against ISIS carried risks given the high level of government threat. The Assad regime had launched a massive offensive in Aleppo city and surrounding areas in late 2013, forcing the insurgents to bring in reinforcements from other provinces; government operations were in full-swing as inter-rebel war erupted.<sup>642</sup> Thus, unsurprisingly, the government ended up benefitting from insurgent infighting: “the rebels lost great human and material resources and diverted men, weapons and ammunition from the Aleppo front at a time when pro-Assad forces were pushing to retake the city... the Syrian army and allied militias made

---

<sup>640</sup> “Syria Crisis: Guide to Armed and Political opposition,” BBC News, 13 December, 2013, (available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/worldmiddle-east-24403003>, last accessed on June 14, 2015); “What ISIS, an al-Qaeda Affiliate in Syria, Really Wants,” *The Economist Explains* (blog), January 20, 2014 (available at <http://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2014/01/economist-explains-12>, last accessed on June 14, 2015); James Traud, “Everyone Is Scared of ISIS,” *Foreign Policy*, 4 October, 2013 (available at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/10/04/everyone-is-scared-of-isis/>, last accessed on June 24, 2015).

<sup>641</sup> As it turned out, its opponents’ poor coordination and command-and-control may have provided badly needed respite for an embattled ISIS, which then managed to regroup in eastern Syria. In particular, Ahrar al-Sham’s fighters in eastern Syria offered safe passage to ISIS’s contingents in two momentous circumstances, in spite of the fact that the organization as a whole had been an active participant in the fight against ISIS around Aleppo (International Crisis Group 2014a, p. 11).

<sup>642</sup> Nassief 2014, pp. 31-6; International Crisis Group 2014a, pp. 7-9.



significant gains on the city's eastern edge, slowly progressing toward their goal of encircling rebel-held neighbourhoods.”<sup>643</sup>

The fact that ISIS was not the initiator of all-out inter-rebel war is also consistent with window theory. ISIS' power was on an upward trajectory and thus it was in the group's interest to postpone a violent confrontation with the rest of the insurgent movement. These kinds of considerations, to be sure, did not dissuade the group from being very assertive in imposing its strict interpretation of sharia law in areas where it held sway and using violence (often taking the form of individual kidnappings, executions and isolated skirmishes) to marginalize rival organizations and intimidate anti-regime activists.<sup>644</sup> These actions inflamed other insurgent groups and may have contributed to their decision to attack ISIS by affecting their threat perception; but they appear more akin to the low-level clashes encountered in all civil war cases discussed in this dissertation than inter-rebel war.<sup>645</sup> Moreover, while much of ISIS' behavior can plausibly be explained by non-strategic ideological zeal, its assertiveness cannot be easily separated from its overall growth strategy (envisioning also the provision of key services and religious outreach activities), which has proven so successful in out-organizing its competitors in Iraq and Syria. In other words, adopting a less assertive approach may have reduced the risk of a preventive attack by the rest of the insurgent movement, but at the cost of undermining ISIS' growth, on which presumably its Caliphate dream rested.

---

<sup>643</sup> International Crisis Group 2014a, pp. 12-3. According to a Liwa al-Towhid's official, the insurgents had to use against ISIS ammunition that they had been saving for an operation to take cover the Aleppo airport (ibid., p. 12; interview conducted in Gaziantep, Turkey, in March 2014). Moreover, ISIS followed through on a threat to end its contribution to the fight against Assad in and around Aleppo unless the insurgents stopped attacking it (ibid., p. 11).

<sup>644</sup> For examples of ISIS' "domineering" behavior, see Caris and Reynolds 2014.

<sup>645</sup> As noted, ISIS continued to coordinate with other insurgent forces until January 2014 despite frequent low-level, localized clashes; for example, the relationship between al-Nusra and ISIS in Raqqa in late 2013 was described as "a cold war" ("Al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria: a Cold War in Raqqa," *Damascus Bureau*, December 18, 2013, available at <http://www.damascusbureau.org/?p=6176>, last accessed on June 15, 2015).

The clashes between ISIS and Northern Storm near Azaz in the fall of 2013 mentioned above are, in a sense, the exception that confirms the rule. The episode amounts to outright inter-rebel war as it consisted of several days of sustained fighting between the two groups. However, it is conspicuous in a context of many negative cases – i.e., situations in which ISIS could have fought other rebel groups in physical proximity, but did not. ISIS’ leadership may have calculated that the military benefits associated with acquiring control of the border crossing may have more than compensated the costs of the fight if it remained limited (as it turned out it did) to the weaker Northern Storm rather than dragging into the fray other insurgent groups. If this were the case (but I do not have decision-making evidence on this), while not predicted by it ISIS’ actions would not be inconsistent with the underlying logic of my argument.

### ***Phase 3: ISIS’ hegemonic bid (2014-15)***

Window theory also helps us make sense of the continuation of inter-rebel war in Syria throughout 2014 and 2015. As noted before, ISIS was largely pushed out of Aleppo and Idlib provinces by a coalition of rebel groups, but after a few weeks it managed to regain control of its Raqqa stronghold, which allowed it to “fight back from the brink of defeat.”<sup>646</sup> ISIS’ recovery was probably facilitated by the fact the government focused its attention mostly on the rest of the opposition forces. As the International Crisis Group observed, “[b]etween January and June 2014, regime aircraft rarely targeted IS strongholds east of Aleppo; easily identifiable IS headquarters remained unscathed; and regime ground forces made no tangible effort to regain ground from IS east of Aleppo.”<sup>647</sup>

---

<sup>646</sup> International Crisis Group 2014a, p. 11.

Then in the summer ISIS went on the offensive on both sides of the Sykes-Picot line. In June, the group took over Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city, with a lightning attack and advanced within 40 miles of Baghdad itself.<sup>648</sup> In the process, ISIS seized massive amounts of military equipment provided by the United States to Iraq: "4 infantry divisions and supporting troops fled the battle in June 2014, leaving behind almost all of their weapons, equipment, and supplies including artillery, tanks, and a variety of other military vehicles."<sup>649</sup> ISIS' blitzkrieg in Iraq also brought about a dramatic expansion of the group's size and finances.<sup>650</sup> The group built on these gains by defeating its rivals in Syria's eastern province of Deir al-Zour in July and capturing rebel-held territory north of Aleppo.<sup>651</sup>

---

<sup>647</sup> International Crisis Group 2014a, p. 12, note 63. See also Terrill 2014, p. 18. Analysts have suggested that the government's restraint towards ISIS in this period was due to the fact that the areas in the east controlled by the group were of lesser strategic importance than those contested by the rest of the opposition (e.g., Aleppo). Moreover, Assad supposedly reasoned that the West would have no choice but to support him against ISIS once "moderate" insurgents had been disposed of.

<sup>648</sup> White 2014; Fabrice Balanche, "L'Inflexible Progression del'Etat Islamique," *Libération*, 3 October, 2014a.

<sup>649</sup> Terrill 2014, p. 18.

<sup>650</sup> The number of ISIS fighters very likely more than tripled in 2014. Before the fall of Mosul, the group's size was typically estimated at around 10,000 fighters, roughly equally distributed in Iraq and Syria (e.g., "The Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria: Two Arab Countries Fall Apart," *The Economist*, 14 June, 2014; Ehab Zahriyeh, "How ISIL Became a Major Force with Only a Few Thousand Fighters," *Al Jazeera*, 19 June, 2014, available at <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/6/19/isil-thousands-fighters.html>, last accessed on June 17, 2015); subsequently, US intelligence agencies' estimates have ranged between 20,000 and 30,000 (Ceylan Yeginsu, "ISIS Draws a Steady Stream of Recruits From Turkey," *New York Times*, 15 September, 2014; Robert Windrem, "ISIS By the Numbers: Foreign Fighter Total Keeps Growing," NBC News, 28 February, 2015, available at <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-terror/isis-numbers-foreign-fighter-total-keeps-growing-n314731>, last accessed on June 17, 2015); analyst Daveed Gartenstein-Ross has put forth a more plausible estimate of around 100,000 fighters ("How Many Fighters does the Islamic State Really Have?" *War on the Rock*, February 9, 2015, available at <http://warontherocks.com/2015/02/how-many-fighters-does-the-islamic-state-really-have/>, last accessed on June 18, 2015). On ISIS' finances, see Patrick B. Johnston, "Countering ISIL's Financing," Testimony presented before the House Financial Services Committee on November 13, 2014.

<sup>651</sup> International Crisis Group 2014a, pp. 27-8.

ISIS has since carried on in its three-front war against Damascus, Baghdad and Syria's insurgents. It is tempting to dismiss the group's behavior as a mere manifestation of its fanaticism, which makes it pick up fights reflexively. But window theory suggests a plausible alternative: from the summer of 2014, ISIS has faced a broad window of opportunity to become the hegemon of Syria's Sunni insurgency; in other words, it has had a clear opportunity to crush its rivals without significant risk of undermining its prospects of beating the Syrian and Iraqi governments and thus reach its (ideological) goal of the Caliphate.

In fact, a favorable inter-rebel balance of power for ISIS – a key ingredient of window of opportunity – has likely been present. Several observers have suggested that with the boost in its capabilities after the take-over of Mosul the group has obtained a clear edge vis-à-vis its rivals. For example, International Crisis Group analyst Noah Bonsey noted that “the rebels lack the capacity and organization, especially compared to the regime and ISIS. They have been effective in the past. Rebels in Idlib and Aleppo threw ISIS out of Idlib province, Aleppo city and western and northern countryside in January, so they have a proven track record against ISIS. But this took place when ISIS was weaker. ISIS has gained a lot of money and manpower since then.”<sup>652</sup> After its losses at ISIS' hands in the summer of 2014, even the al-Qaeda affiliate al-Nusra Front has reportedly experienced serious problems of internal cohesion and a hemorrhage of fighters to its jihadi rival.<sup>653</sup> Collectively the other insurgent groups could probably marshal more men than ISIS, but the group's leadership may have reasonably concluded that its superior morale, cohesion and weaponry could more than compensate for its numerical inferiority, in particular given the

---

<sup>652</sup> “Why ISIS Is Gaining Ground – and So Hard to Beat” (interview with Noah Bonsey), *Syria Deeply* (available at <http://www.syriadeeply.org/articles/2014/10/6227/isis-gaining-ground-hard-beat/>, last accessed on June 18, 2015).

<sup>653</sup> Aron Lund, “Syria's al-Qaeda Wing Searches for a Strategy,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 18 September 2014 (available at <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=56673>, last accessed on June 19, 2015).

highly fragmented nature of the insurgent movement. After all, heavily armed and much larger Iraqi forces crumbled in the face of ISIS' determined push in northern Iraq in June 2014.

The other key element of window of opportunity – a limited government threat – has also be a central characteristic of the Syrian battlefield in 2014-15 from the point of view of ISIS. After the fall of Mosul, the Assad regime reversed its initial strategy of largely leaving ISIS undisturbed, but fighting the group has remained of secondary importance for the government.<sup>654</sup> Assad seems to have adopted a strategy of “defensive protraction”: due to dwindling manpower resources, his forces have gone on the offensive on three priority fronts (Aleppo, Damascus and central Syria), while relying on a network of isolated defensive positions in the rest of the country to nominally assert government presence throughout the country;<sup>655</sup> unlike other insurgent groups, ISIS has not been the main target of those rare government offensive maneuvers.<sup>656</sup> Moreover, it is far from obvious that Damascus would be able to easily dispose of ISIS if it decided to focus its attention on the group; the fact that ISIS has been more successful than the regime and its allies in making gains against other insurgents in 2014-15 strongly suggests otherwise.

Of course, even if inter-rebel fighting in this context did not pose an existential threat for ISIS, it did entail some opportunity costs in terms of foregone gains against the government.<sup>657</sup>

---

<sup>654</sup> White 2015; Christopher Kozak, “An Army in All Corners: Assad’s Campaign Strategy in Syria,” *Middle East Security Report* 26, Institute for the Study of War, 2015.

<sup>655</sup> Kozak 2015. In the words of the author of the report, “Assad is pursuing a strategy to put an ‘army in all corners’ by maintaining remote regime outposts throughout Syria which pin the outer bounds of a unified and contiguous Syrian state. This strategy enables Assad to assert his presence throughout Syria and preempt any call for the partition of the Syrian state... regime forces have therefore postured to maintain the status quo and avoid defeat rather than to win the war outright” (p. 9).

<sup>656</sup> See Kozak 2015, in particular p. 31, which reports major military operations by geographical front in Syria in 2013-15. See also Anne Barnard, “Assad’s Forces May Be Aiding New ISIS Surge,” *New York Times*, 2 June, 2015.

But these are precisely the kinds of marginal costs that may be warranted by the prospective benefits of a hegemonic bid in a context in which the government is not clearly more powerful than the would-be hegemon. In fact, inter-rebel war seems to have brought to ISIS the benefits that we would expect to arise when coethnic rebel groups with overlapping mobilization bases face each other: ISIS has grown to an important extent by absorbing large numbers of defectors and extracting resources from civilian populations previously under its rivals' control.<sup>658</sup> In the summer 2014, ISIS made inroads in eastern Syria by "crushing the Nusra Front's powerful eastern wing and expelling or absorbing most other rebel groups in the region. Hundreds of Nusra Front loyalists were killed and others began to defect, sensing that the Islamic State was clearly the stronger and more capable jihadi group."<sup>659</sup> In Iraq's and Syria's incendiary sectarian climate brought about by large-scale violence and Sunni political disenfranchisement, ISIS has managed to obtain at least passive support from Sunni communities that do not necessarily share its ideological zeal where it got rid of rival groups.<sup>660</sup> In these instances, the organization can effectively "present itself as the sole guardian of Sunni interests in a vast territory cutting across Iraq and Syria," while also providing a modicum of stability and order that has largely been absent since the civil war onset.<sup>661</sup>

---

<sup>657</sup> For example, ISIS could have made more territorial gains against government defensive outposts like those achieved around Palmyria in eastern Homs province in April 2015 (Jeffrey White and Oula Abdulhamid Alrifai, "Growing Rebel Capabilities Press the Syrian Regime," *Policywatch* 2414, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2015).

<sup>658</sup> Erika Solomon, "Isis Uses Humility as Tactic for Conquest," *Financial Times*, 27 July, 2014.

<sup>659</sup> Lund 2014. See also International Crisis Group 2014a, p. 29 and Weiss and Hassan 2015, pp. 161-2.

<sup>660</sup> Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, "Why Some Secular Sunnis Support ISIS," *Business Insider*, 14 March, 2015 (available at <http://www.businessinsider.com/why-some-secular-sunnis-support-isis-2015-3>, last accessed on June 19, 2015).

Finally, two sets of events that may seem at odds with window theory are worth discussing: ISIS' fight against the Syrian Kurdish forces of the Democratic Union Party (better known by its Kurdish acronym PYD) near Kobane and al-Nusra's attacks on the US-supported Hazm Movement and Syrian Revolutionary Front in northern Syria in 2014-2015. Upon closer inspection, neither episode contradicts my argument. The PYD never engaged in sustained anti-government military operations and so its fight against ISIS can hardly be considered an episode of inter-rebel war. By contrast, the organizations targeted by al-Nusra were clearly anti-Assad rebel groups but they were also receiving military support from the United States, which was conducting bombing operations against the al-Qaeda affiliate; this fact makes this episode of inter-rebel war inherently less puzzling and unproblematic for my theory.

PYD-held Kobane was one of ISIS' main targets in the second half of 2014; located on the Syria-Turkey border and on the edges of the "Caliphate", the Syrian Kurdish-majority town is of strategic value for ISIS as a supply route and for both defense of Raqqa and expansion towards Aleppo.<sup>662</sup> The PYD-ISIS fight occurred across ethnic lines, given that ISIS tends to be perceived as a Sunni *Arab* outfit and typically dubs Kurds as "apostates", but PYD can hardly be considered a rebel group.<sup>663</sup> In fact, since the summer of 2012, the PYD has been in a "de facto alliance with the regime, which handed territories [mostly in the northern Hasaka province] over

---

<sup>661</sup> Anne Barnard and Tim Arango, "Using Violence and Persuasion, ISIS Makes Political Gains," *New York Times*, 3 June, 2015.

<sup>662</sup> Balanche 2014a; "Islamic State, Turkey and Syria's Kurds: Murky Relations," *The Economist*, 22 September, 2014; Caleb Weiss, "Islamic State Advances Near Kobane," Long War Journal, 1 October 2014 (available at [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/10/islamic\\_state\\_advances\\_near\\_ko.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/10/islamic_state_advances_near_ko.php), last accessed on June 20, 2015).

<sup>663</sup> ISIS does recruit Sunni Kurds but it has much less appeal among them compared to among Sunni Arabs (Weiss and Hassan, 2015 pp. 157-9).

to it while continuing to give material support to those territories,” so as to free government forces to battle the Sunni insurgency.<sup>664</sup>

By contrast, the clashes between al-Nusra, on the hand, and the Hazm Movement and the Syrian Revolutionary Front, on the other, can be considered as episodes of inter-rebel war, which normally should not occur, given that they were facing the common threat posed by ISIS and Assad. But this a very idiosyncratic instance of inter-rebel war: the two Free Syrian Army affiliates passed a severe vetting process to receive US military support and thus found themselves both on the same side as al-Nusra against the regime and on opposite sides when the United States started bombing the al-Qaeda affiliate in September 2014.<sup>665</sup> In this kind of scenario, my argument envisions competing pushes towards inter-rebel cooperation and conflict and is thus indeterminate.

### *Alternative explanations and endogeneity concerns*

Alternative arguments tend to have less explanatory power than window theory in the Syrian context. MWC logic would incorrectly predict continued inter-rebel cooperation until at least the summer of 2014. When the anti-ISIS rebel operations occurred, in early 2014, the Syrian government could count on a larger number of fighters than the opposition as a whole and

---

<sup>664</sup> International Crisis Group, “Flight of Icarus? The PYD’s Precarious Rise in Syria,” *Middle East Report* 151, 2014b, p. i. The report notes that “PYD officials acknowledge they have made a strategic decision not to confront Damascus, yet reject charges of collusion, describing themselves as a ‘third current’ between an oppressive regime and hardline rebel militants” (p. 7). See also International Crisis Group, “Syria’s Kurds: A Struggle Within a Struggle,” *Middle East Report* 136, 2013b.

<sup>665</sup> “Setback for U.S.-backed rebels in Syria,” CBS News, 4 November 2014 (available at <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/al-qaeda-linked-nusra-front-fights-rebels-syria-turkey-border/>, last accessed on June 20, 2015); “U.S.-backed Syria Rebels Crumble Under al Qaeda Fire,” CBS News, 3 March, 2015 (available at <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/us-backed-syria-rebel-group-hazm-defeated-al-qaeda-nusra-front/>, last accessed on June 20, 2015).



controlled a comparable amount of territory and a larger share of the population.<sup>666</sup> Moreover, in late 2013-early 2014, there was no indication of a power trend favorable to the rebel movement (which would herald the emergence of a minimum winning coalition formed by a subset of rebel groups), as the regime was making territorial gains and was poised to launch a major assault on Aleppo.<sup>667</sup> By contrast, MWC logic, like window theory, would correctly predict ISIS' two-way fight against both Assad and the rest of insurgent movement from the summer of 2014, in as much it can be argued that the group became was the strongest belligerent in the Syrian landscape after the fall of Mosul.<sup>668</sup>

I do not have access to good-quality information about the different groups' leadership to advance any solid claims about the effects of individual personalities on inter-rebel war.

However, the fact that a broad array of rebel groups (presumably with a range of different personalities at their helm) decided to attack ISIS in early 2014 points to situational factors as more important forces behind their actions.

---

<sup>666</sup> In late 2014 Christopher Kozak estimated that a combination of battlefield attrition, defections and desertions had reduced the size of the Syrian Arab Army from 325,000 fighters before the war to about 150,000 (plus thousands of Iranian and Iraqi Shia militias, Syrian paramilitary forces and Hezbollah fighters), which implies that Assad's regular forces in early 2014 were larger than 150,000 ("The Assad Regime Under Stress: Conscription and Protest among Alawite and Minority Populations in Syria," Institute for the Study of War, 15 December, 2014, available at <http://iswsyria.blogspot.com/2014/12/the-assad-regime-under-stress.html>, last accessed on June 20, 2015). In late 2013, the overall insurgent movement was estimated at around 100,000 fighters ("Syria: Nearly Half Rebel Fighters are Jihadists or Hardline Islamists, Says IHS Jane's Report," *The Daily Telegraph*, 15 September, 2013). Political geographer Fabrice Balanche estimated that in late 2013 the regime controlled 50-60 percent of the population, compared to 15-20 percent under insurgent control, with the two sides controlling roughly comparable amounts of territory ("Insurrection, Contre-insurrection et Communautés," *Geostrategic Maritime Review* 4, 2014b; "L'Insurrection Syrienne et la Guerre des Cartes," *OrientXXI*, 24 October 2013 (available at <http://orientxxi.info/magazine/l-insurrection-syrienne-et-la,0397>, last accessed on June 20, 2015).

<sup>667</sup> International Crisis Group 2014a, pp. 7-9.

<sup>668</sup> Notice, however, that based on Fotini Christia's (2012) preferred measure of the balance of power, ISIS would not be stronger than the government as the former controlled only about 30 percent of the country's territory (including vast desert areas), compared to the approximately 50 percent under Assad's authority (where an estimated 55-72 percent of the population lives). Aron Lund, "The Political Geography of Syria's War: An Interview With Fabrice Balanche," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 15 January 2015 (available at <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=5887>, last accessed on June 20, 2015).

By analogous logic, varying degrees of group cohesion cannot explain the pattern of inter-rebel war as both relatively incohesive groups affiliated with the Free Syrian Army and the highly disciplined al-Nusra participated in the fight against ISIS. Moreover, the decision-making evidence discussed above indicates that inter-rebel war did not occur through a process of inadvertent escalation of low-level clashes but was in fact the result of conscious, if difficult, leaderships' decisions to confront the growing threat posed by ISIS.

Similarly, ideology does not seem a convincing explanation for inter-rebel violence as the groups that fought ISIS spanned the rebellion's full ideological spectrum, from secular-nationalist to jihadi.<sup>669</sup> In addition, the notion that ISIS' jihadi ideology makes the group inherently more aggressive and threatening to other organizations, thus causing inter-rebel war, flies in the face of the fact that al-Nusra, with virtually the same ideology, has largely cooperated with other insurgent groups throughout the Syrian conflict. This is not necessarily to deny that certain ideological orientations may be associated with a higher risk of inter-rebel war, but the pattern of the case suggests that structural factors like the distribution of power powerfully constrain and shape rebel group-level impulses.

A more plausible variant of this kind of argument would emphasize actual group behavior, perhaps driven by ideological zeal, rather than abstract ideology, as a cause of inter-rebel war. Several observers have contrasted the al-Nusra's and ISIS' approach and attitude toward the rest of the insurgent movement in the second half of 2013, before the outbreak of all-out inter-rebel war: the former has been described as consensus-seeking, bent on respectful cooperation with other groups and prioritizing the fight against the regime, while the latter has been accused of being domineering and more interested in controlling territory and imposing its

---

<sup>669</sup> The anti-ISIS forces include, among others, non-ideological groups part of the Free Syria Army-affiliated Syria Revolutionaries Front, the moderate Islamist Liwa al-Towhid, the hardline Islamist Ahrar al-Sham and the jihadist al-Nusra.

version of sharia than defeating Assad.<sup>670</sup> The corresponding hypothesis that the early 2014 attack by a broad array of rebels on ISIS was a consequence of the group's manifested aggressive/expansionist intentions cannot be dismissed as its assertive behavior and growth (which would have prompted a gamble for resurrection) went hand in hand; in other words, with the available evidence it is not possible to tell whether ISIS' growth would have provoked a similar reaction had it behaved in a less threatening way. However, it should be recalled that window theory does not necessarily envision growth differentials between rebel groups that may cause windows of vulnerability as emerging exogenously. Rebel groups will often resort to salami tactics to acquire marginal advantages vis-à-vis rivals, while also trying to keep the levels of hostilities below a certain threshold to avoid all-out war; this is an important mechanism through which even rebel groups that are primarily interested in preserving their security concretely grasp the imperatives deriving from the anarchic environment in which they operate. Some groups (as arguably is the case with ISIS) may be especially effective, thanks to superior organizational skills and discipline, at capitalizing on the gains deriving from salami slicing and may thus end up inviting a preventive attack.

I now turn to alternative explanations focused on the actions of external interveners and the government. As several observers have suggested, the existence of multiple sources of external funding for the rebellion, with foreign sponsors often competing for influence on the ground by supporting different groups, may have contributed to the proliferation of rebel organizations.<sup>671</sup> However, I could not find any indication that foreign supporters encouraged

---

<sup>670</sup> See, e.g., International Crisis Group 2014a; Weiss and Hassan 2015, pp. 149-52.

<sup>671</sup> See, for example, International Crisis Group, "Anything But Politics: The State of Syria's Political Opposition," *Middle East Report* 146, 2013c, pp. 11-18; O'Bagy 2013, p. 13.

their local clients to fight each other rather than cooperate against the regime.<sup>672</sup> Moreover, there are reasons to believe that third-party states' leverage is limited. Most notably, after the designation by the United States of al-Nusra as a foreign terrorist organization in December 2012, several groups affiliated with the Free Syrian Army and plausible candidates as recipients for Western military support refused to distance themselves from the organization and continued to conduct joint military operations.<sup>673</sup>

What about the role of Assad's regime? There is no indication that the government tried to drive a wedge between rebel groups (let alone succeeded at it) by offering to negotiate with some organizations at the expense of others or by providing positive inducements for some groups to attack their rivals (for example in the form of weapons, financial support or reduced military pressure). By contrast, the evidence presented above suggests that the government contributed to create the window of opportunity exploited by ISIS from the summer of 2014 on by focusing the bulk of its offensive operations against other insurgent groups, thus generating a relatively permissive threat environment for the organization. It is not clear whether the prospect of inducing inter-rebel war factored in Assad's calculus or his military strategy was determined only by the perception that other rebel groups represent a more serious threat, because of their positioning near strategic points (e.g., Aleppo rather than in the more remote east) and the possibility (albeit remote) that some of these groups could serve as ground forces in support of a

---

<sup>672</sup> In fact, al-Nusra's non-state external supporter al-Qaeda Central urged the group to end its fight against ISIS (Yousuf Basil, Mohammed Tawfeeq and Ray Sanchez, "Al Qaeda Boss Ayman al-Zawahiri Calls for Halt to Jihadist Infighting," CNN, 3 May, 2014, available at <http://www.cnn.com/2014/05/03/world/meast/ayman-al-zawahiri-message-syria/>, last accessed on June 21, 2015).

<sup>673</sup> Michael R. Gordon and Anne Barnard, "U.S. Places Militant Syrian Rebel Group on List of Terrorist Organizations," *New York Times*, 10 December, 2012; Bill Roggio, "Chief of Syrian Revolutionaries Front Says al Qaeda Is 'Not Our Problem'," *Long War Journal*, 3 April, 2014 (available at [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/04/chief\\_of\\_syrian\\_revolutionary.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/04/chief_of_syrian_revolutionary.php), last accessed on June 21, 2015).

more forceful US intervention. In any case, as already discussed, the fact that the window of opportunity was endogenous to government's decisions is not in itself problematic for window theory. My argument would be weakened only if there were evidence suggesting that the government's decision was driven by some generalizable logic (rather than the ad hoc considerations mentioned above), which could suggest that the causal factors envisioned by window theory could be mere intervening variables in a more complex causal story.

### ***Summary***

Window theory helps us make sense of inter-rebel dynamics in Syria. At the beginning, Sunni insurgent groups with a variety of ideological perspectives largely cooperated in their intense fight against the Assad regime as no organization had a clear edge over its rivals. ISIS' arrival to Syria altered this equilibrium: the group soon started outgrowing its rivals, which came to perceive it as a threat; after months of heated debate, a coalition of rebel groups attacked ISIS in early 2014, in a pattern consistent with window of vulnerability logic. After initial defeats, ISIS managed to regroup and following its expansion in Iraq has been on the offensive against its Syrian counterparts from the summer of 2014. ISIS' behavior seems consistent with window of opportunity logic as since the fall of Mosul the group has probably grown to become the strongest rebel group in Syria (and perhaps the strongest belligerent), while Damascus seems to have decided to focus its dwindling military resources on the rest of the insurgent movement.

### **5. Conclusions**

The three case studies presented in this chapter provide preliminary evidence of the external validity of my argument. Window logics seem to drive armed groups' behavior in a variety of

geo-political settings beyond Iraq and Ethiopia. The Lebanon case study corroborates the coethnicity hypothesis as infighting was more common among coethnics than non-coethnics. The available evidence of the intra-Maronite fight is fully consistent with window of opportunity logic: the Phalanges set to use force to become the hegemon in the Christian camp by attacking their weaker coethnic rival when the threat posed by Syria receded; the group then experienced no difficulty in rallying the Christian population to its side. By contrast, the ethnically diverse opposing coalition – the National Movement – did not experience significant infighting in the same period. Window theory cannot explain some episodes of inter-rebel war across ethnic lines after 1984 in Lebanon. In my analysis, I pointed to a widely noted feature of the case in the mid-1980s – a “deep stalemate” – as a plausible explanation for the observed “anomaly” and a scope condition for my argument; empirical analysis of other cases will be needed to assess whether deep stalemates tend to weaken the causal dynamics envisioned by window theory.

The Sri Lanka case represents a poster child of sorts for window of opportunity logic, as the LTTE sequentially targeted its weaker Tamil rivals in phases of the civil war in which the government did not pose an imminent military threat.

Finally, the available – albeit admittedly limited – evidence suggests that window logic shaped the behavior the rebel groups pitted against the Assad regime in Syria. Importantly, a shared worldview did not prevent the jihadi groups al-Nusra and ISIS from coming to blows when the balance of power and threat environment prompted, respectively, to gamble for resurrection and launch a hegemonic bid.

The obvious limit of these case studies is that they cannot tell us much about how window theory travels beyond them. A skeptical reader may not help but wonder whether chance (or worse, cherry-picking) can explain the fit between my argument and the evidence. To address

these kinds of concerns, in the next chapter I turn to statistical analysis to test on a dataset of all rebel dyads in the post-Cold War era an observable implication of window theory: coethnic rebel groups should be more likely to fight each other.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Assessing External Validity with Statistical Analysis: Are Coethnic Rebel Groups More Likely to Fight Each Other?**

#### **1. Introduction**

This chapter presents a preliminary assessment of the external validity of window theory using an original dataset of dyads of rebel groups that combines three existing datasets. A full test of my argument would require fine grained measures of the inter-rebel balance of power and the threat environment faced by the insurgents – a far cry from the coarse-grained available data. As the case studies in the previous chapters made clear, the threat environment can rapidly change as a result of a government’s decision to launch a major offensive, which would not be reflected in slow-moving indicators of government strength like GDP and the size of the security forces. Similarly, a rebel group’s strength can sharply decline as it experiences problems of internal cohesion, but this change in the inter-rebel balance of power would not be necessarily captured by existing data on insurgent strength. It is, however, possible to test a key observable implication of my argument: other things being the same, dyads of coethnic rebel groups should be more likely to experience inter-rebel war than other dyads.

I do include in the analysis variables measuring government and rebel strength, and the degree to which the security forces are stretched thin to deal with the insurgents – a proxy for the insurgents’ threat environment; however, due to the data limitations just discussed, I consider them more like control variables for my test of the coethnicity hypothesis than proper tests of the other components of window theory.



To preview my results, I find a robust positive association between rebel groups' coethnicity and their propensity to fight each other. I also conduct a test of minimum winning coalition theory – the closest competing argument – with data compiled by Fotini Christia, but find no supporting evidence for it.<sup>674</sup>

It should be noted that I do not have a specific identification strategy and thus the analysis below should be interpreted as providing evidence of correlation rather than causation. Reverse causality does not seem a major concern here, as it is hard to make a plausible case that the coethnicity of a dyad is being caused by it experiencing infighting (in particular given that coethnicity is time-invariant within dyads in the dataset). However, potential problems of omitted variable bias cannot be ruled out as easily. In particular, it could be the case that groups that emerge from the fragmentation of the same organization are likely to be coethnic and are also especially prone to fighting each other because of the disagreements that led to the split in the first place or recriminations provoked by the splintering itself. However, the qualitative evidence presented in the case studies offers grounds to believe that the statistical association I identify is not spurious, as I discuss below.

The rest of the chapter is organized as follows. Section 2 describes the structure of my data, the source datasets and the variables included in my models. Section 3 presents the results of the statistical analysis. Section 4 concludes by summarizing the main results and discussing steps for further research.

## **2. Data**

*Unit of analysis.* My units of analysis are dyads of rebel groups pitted against the same government in a multi-party civil war in a given year in the period 1989-2011, for a total of

---

<sup>674</sup> Fotini Christia, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

1,179 observations and 359 unique rebel dyads. The list of rebel groups and the years in which they were engaged in a civil war come from the Non-State Actor Data,<sup>675</sup> which contains information on dyads of governments and rebel groups involved in civil wars and is based on the UCDP Dyadic Dataset.<sup>676</sup>

Dependent variable. My dependent variable – *inter-rebel war* – is a dummy indicating whether the units of a rebel dyad engaged in armed conflict against each other in a given year resulting in at least 25 battle-related deaths. This information, available for the post-1989 period, comes from the UCDP Non-State Conflict Dataset.<sup>677</sup> This is not a perfect measure of inter-rebel war as defined in Chapter 2 – a purposeful, major violent clash between rebel organizations – as it cannot distinguish violence occurring under the direction of rebel leaders from skirmishes taking place at the initiative of foot soldiers or low-level commanders. However, the low number of episodes of inter-rebel war in the dataset (see below) suggests that that the dependent variable is likely not capturing skirmishes, which appear quite pervasive based on academic case studies and journalistic reports of specific episodes of multi-party civil wars.

Unlike the dataset used in the only published study of inter-rebel war (coauthored by Hanne Fjelde and Desirée Nilsson), mine is dyadic, which is warranted by the dyadic nature of the coethnicity hypothesis.<sup>678</sup> Despite the fact that both datasets rely on the same source data, the

---

<sup>675</sup> David E. Cunningham, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch and Idean Salehyan. “It Takes Two: A Dyadic Analysis of Civil War Duration and Outcome,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 53 (4), 2009: 570-97. See Chapter 2 for a discussion of selection issues associated with the exclusion of civil war cases with one rebel group only.

<sup>676</sup> Lotta Harbom, Erik Melander and Peter Wallensteen, “Dyadic Dimensions of Armed Conflict, 1946–2007,” *Journal of Peace Research* 45 (5), 2008: 697–710.

<sup>677</sup> Ralph Sundberg, Kristine Eck and Joakim Kreutz, “Introducing the UCDP Non-State Conflict Dataset,” *Journal of Peace Research*, 49 (2), 2012: 351-62.

two lists of inter-rebel war (the dependent variables in both studies) differ substantially: Fjelde and Nilsson report 87 rebel group-years characterized by inter-rebel war out of a total of 752 observations, while my dataset includes only 19 rebel dyad-years of inter-rebel war out of 1,148 observations. This discrepancy has several causes. First, as Fjelde and Nilsson's dataset is monadic, any episode of inter-rebel war involving two rebel groups in the Non-state Actor Dataset is double-counted (once for each member of the dyad).<sup>679</sup> Second, in order to maximize the number of observations, the authors include armed conflicts that occur between a rebel group and a faction of a rebel group, even if the latter has not yet reached the twenty-five battle-death threshold in the fight against the government and is thus not reported in the Non-State Actor and UCDP Dyadic datasets. Third, Fjelde and Nilsson include rebel groups that have been inactive in the anti-government struggle for up to five years (as long as the conflict has not ended with either a government or a rebel victory), since such a "rebel group exists and could potentially engage in interrebel fighting."<sup>680</sup> By contrast, as noted, I follow the Non-state Actor Dataset's list of rebel groups and years in which they are considered as civil war belligerents. This is necessary as the information I need to code my control variables is available only for the groups in the Non-state Actor Dataset. Moreover, including rebel groups that have been inactive against the government for a long time or organizations that have yet to engage in sustained armed conflict against it would risk circumventing the theoretical puzzle motivating this dissertation: the

---

<sup>678</sup> Hanne Fjelde and Desirée Nilsson, "Rebels against Rebels: Explaining Violence between Rebel Groups," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56 (4), 2012: 604-28. As the authors (p. 622) note, with "information on the prefighting relations between the groups, such as shared ideological ties, *shared ethnic base*, or previous patterns of cooperative behavior... it would be pertinent to proceed to a dyadic research design and examine which pairs of rebel groups are most likely to fight each other" (emphasis added).

<sup>679</sup> For example, there are two entries for the year 2006 for the conflict dyad Hamas-Fatah, one of for each of its members.

<sup>680</sup> Fjelde and Nilsson 2012, p. 615

occurrence of large-scale fighting between non-state actors despite their common enmity (manifested in actual violent behavior, i.e., war) toward the government.

Key independent variable. My main independent variable – *coethnicity* – indicates whether the organizations in a rebel dyad are “linked” to the same ethnic group. To code coethnicity I use the ACD2EPR data, which provides two measures of association between rebel organizations and ethnic groups: (1) whether the organization made claims to fight on behalf of an ethnic group and (2) whether it recruits from that group; these are similar, but not identical, to the conditions presented in Chapter 2 to code rebel groups’ ethnicity and used for the case studies.<sup>681</sup> The rebel groups in a dyad need to satisfy both of these conditions for the same ethnic group to be coded as coethnic. In one specification, I use as independent variable *ethnic* – a dummy indicating whether the civil war between the government and the rebels is fought along ethnic or ideological lines.<sup>682</sup>

I conduct a rough test of the minimum winning coalition hypothesis with *hegemonic* – a dummy variable coded by Fotini Christia taking on 1 when one of the civil war belligerents (as it happens, the incumbent in all cases included in my dataset) has fifty-percent-plus-one of the total number of fighters in a civil war.<sup>683</sup> Christia uses the variable to test the observable implication of her argument that civil wars in which the balance of power is consistently skewed toward a single actor should see relatively few changes in alliances. By extension, rebel dyads in hegemonic civil wars should be less likely to experience infighting as minimum winning

---

<sup>681</sup> Julian Wucherpfennig et al., “Ethnicity, the State, and the Duration of Civil War,” *World Politics* 64 (1), 2012: 79-115.

<sup>682</sup> The variable is drawn from the dataset compiled by Laia Balcells and Stathis N. Kalyvas (“Does Warfare Matter?, Severity, Duration, and Outcomes of Civil Wars,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 58 (8), 2014: 1390-418).

<sup>683</sup> Christia 2012, pp. 221-5 and 271-5.

coalition logic suggests that their members should stick together in the face of overwhelmingly powerful incumbent; thus *hegemonic* should enter the models with a negative sign.

Control variables. I include a number of control variables. The dummies *balance* and *extreme weakness* indicate, respectively, whether there is a rough balance of power between the members of a rebel dyad and whether one group is below the threshold of extreme weakness discussed in Chapter 2; the baseline category is *preponderance*, which indicates a stark imbalance of power between the members of the dyads without extreme weakness. Using information from the Non-state Actor Data, I operationalize extreme weakness as a situation in which one of the two rebel groups in a dyad has at least three times as many fighters as the other, while I code preponderance based on whether one group can marshal between two and three times as many fighters as the other.<sup>684</sup> I expect *balance* and *absolute weakness* to enter the models with negative sign, as dyads with one of these two features should be less likely to experience infighting than dyads with a preponderant member.

I proxy the extent to which the government poses a threat to rebel groups with *overstretch*, which measures the number of insurgent fighters pitted against a government in a given year across all dyads; I use *rebel groups* – a count of all rebel groups a government is facing in a given year – as an alternative measure. I expect these variables to have a positive sign. In some specifications I include the proxy for government strength *military personnel*, indicating the size of the armed forces (in thousands of men), which should display a negative sign. I also control for regime type with *polity* (ranging from -10 to 10 on the Polity scale) and *anocracy* (a dummy corresponding to scores between -5 and 5) as Fjelde and Nilsson find that

---

<sup>684</sup> Note that the operationalization of extreme weakness used in the case studies is more nuanced, as it takes into account the weak group's growth prospect in addition to the fighters' ratio.

rebels fighting against mixed regimes are more prone to infighting.<sup>685</sup> Finally, in some specifications I include *external support* and *territorial control* – dummies indicating, respectively, if one of the members of a rebel dyad was openly supported by another country and whether it controlled some territory, as Fjelde and Nilsson find a positive association between these variables and inter-rebel fighting.<sup>686</sup>

**Table 6.1: Descriptive statistics**

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Min	Max
Inter-rebel war	0.016	0.124	0	1
Coethnic	0.138	0.345	0	1
Ethnic civil war	0.926	0.262	0	1
Extreme weakness	0.471	0.499	0	1
Balance	0.326	0.469	0	1
Overstretch	27,647.17	35,521.84	0	256,000
Military personnel	917.182	865.377	3	3,400
Rebel groups	5.719	2.861	2	11
External support	0.511	0.500	0	1
Territorial control	0.449	0.498	0	1
Polity	4.605	6.192	-9	10
Anocracy	0.193	0.394	0	1
Hegemonic	0.699	0.459	0	1

<sup>685</sup> I draw the information on military personnel and regime type from the dataset compiled by Seden Akcinaroglu (“Rebel Interdependencies and Civil War Outcomes,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56 (5), 2012: 879-903).

<sup>686</sup> This information comes from the Non-state Actor Data.

### 3. Analysis

Due to the rarity of inter-rebel war in the dataset, I conduct the panel data analysis with rare-event logit.<sup>687</sup> I report robust standard errors clustered by civil war country in all specifications. Mindful of concerns about atheoretical, “garbage-can” models, I include in the analysis only a handful of key variables, which are related to window theory, the main alternative argument – minimum winning coalition (MWC) – or have been found to be significant predictor of infighting by Fjelde and Nilsson.<sup>688</sup>

Column 1 in Table 6.2 presents a simple bivariate analysis, where the dummy for ethnic civil war (between government and rebels, not between rebels) is not a significant predictor of inter-rebel war. Column 2 reports a bivariate model with the rebel coethnicity dummy, which is significant at the 0.1 level. In Column 3 I introduce two dummies measuring the inter-rebel balance of power – *extreme weakness* and *balance* – with *preponderance* as the omitted category; both have the expected negative sign but only *balance* reaches statistical significance. *Coethnic* is significant at the 0.01 level. Model 4 includes *overstretch*, a proxy for government threat, which has the expected positive sign and is statistically significant; the coethnicity dummy retains its significance level. Model 5 adds to the previous specification the size of the security forces, which has the expected negative sign and is significant at the 0.1 level; *coethnic* retains its significance and so does *overstretch* but the dummy indicating a roughly balanced distribution of power among members of a rebel dyad (*balance*) is no longer significant.

---

<sup>687</sup> Gary King and Langche Zeng, “Explaining Rare Events in International Relations,” *International Organization* 55 (3), 2001: 693–715.

<sup>688</sup> Christopher H. Achen, “Let’s Put Garbage-Can Regressions and Probits Where They Belong,” *Conflict Management and Peace Research* 22 (4), 2005: 327–39; Kevin A. Klarke, “The Phantom Menace: Omitted Variable Bias in Econometric Research,” *Conflict Management and Peace Research* 22 (4), 2005: 341–52; James Lee Ray, “Constructing Multivariate Analyses (of Dangerous Dyads),” *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 22 (4), 2005: 277–92.

**Table 6.2: Testing the coethnicity argument (I)**

Model	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Ethnic civil war	-0.980 (-0.84)				
Coethnic		1.335* (1.84)	2.140*** (2.84)	2.334*** (3.05)	1.959** (2.08)
Extreme weakness			-0.975 (-1.14)	-0.903 (-1.08)	-0.307 (-0.43)
Balance			-1.366** (-2.35)	-1.383** (-2.29)	-0.673 (-1.33)
Overstretch				0.00001** (2.41)	0.00002*** (3.09)
Military personnel					-0.002* (-1.67)
Constant	-3.195*** (-3.46)	-4.384*** (-5.81)	-3.976*** (-3.83)	-4.674*** (-4.15)	-4.334*** (-5.41)
Observations	1,178	1,179	1050	1050	973

Note: Rare-event logit with robust standard errors (Z values in parentheses)

\* significant at .1; \*\* significant at .05; \*\*\* significant at .01.

Table 6.3 reports a series of models with additional controls. *Coethnic* remains statistically significant throughout all specifications, ranging from the 0.1 to 0.05 levels; the two dummies measuring the inter-rebel balance of power are never significant, while the measure of government forces' overstretch retains significance (ranging from the 0.05 to the 0.01 level) and the size of security forces is significant in two specifications out of five at the 0.1 level. In model 6, I replace *overstretch* with a count of the rebel groups pitted against the government (*rebel groups*), but the variable is not significant. In models 7 and 8 I introduce, respectively, the dummies for rebels' external support and territorial control, neither of which approaches



statistical significance. Models 9 and 10 include *polity* and *anocracy*, respectively; only the latter is significant (at the 0.1 level), with a positive sign that confirms Fjelde and Nilsson's finding.

**Table 6.3: Testing the coethnicity argument (II)**

Model	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
Coethnic	1.600** (2.31)	1.969** (1.99)	1.973* (1.69)	1.912** (2.17)	2.081** (2.37)
Extreme weakness	-0.772 (-0.69)	0.132 (0.18)	-0.340 (-0.39)	-0.199 (-0.27)	0.054 (0.07)
Balance	-0.877 (-1.23)	-0.237 (-0.41)	-0.702 (-1.10)	-0.829 (-1.60)	-0.581 (-1.08)
Rebel groups	-0.268 (-0.90)				
Military personnel	-0.001 (-0.69)	-0.003 (-0.93)	-0.002* (-1.73)	-0.003* (-1.91)	-0.001 (-0.55)
Overstretch		0.00001** (2.23)	0.00002*** (3.12)	0.00002*** (2.84)	0.00001** (2.44)
External support		1.053 (0.91)			
Territorial control			0.014 (0.02)		
Polity				-0.030 (-0.58)	
Anocracy					1.404*
Constant	-2.377** (-1.96)	-5.169*** (-4.84)	-4.272*** (-3.85)	-4.103*** (-6.01)	(1.85) -5.341*** (-7.29)
Observations	973	969	970	948	970

*Note:* Rare-event logit with robust standard errors (Z values in parentheses)

\* significant at .1; \*\* significant at .05; \*\*\* significant at .01.

The magnitude of the effect of coethnicity varies considerably across models (see Table 6.4).<sup>689</sup> In models 3 and 4, the probability of inter-rebel war is over 10 percentage points higher for a coethnic dyad than for a non-coethnic dyad, with all other variables set at their median; in model 5 (which adds as the size of the security forces to the controls included in model 4) coethnic dyads face a risk 0.3 percent points higher than their non-coethnic counterparts. Even this much smaller effect, however, is not trivial if one considers that the baseline probability of inter-rebel war in the dataset is very low, with the event occurring only in 1.6 percent of the observations.<sup>690</sup>

For the purpose of comparison, I now turn to a discussion of the magnitude of the other effects that reach statistical significance in at least two specifications. Based on the results of model 4, dyads characterized by a balanced distribution of power are about 1.3 percentage points less likely to experience infighting other things being equal, but, as noted, *balance* is significant only in two specifications. A change in *overstretch* from the 50<sup>th</sup> to the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile (i.e., from a situation in which the government faces a combined insurgent force of 18,000 compared to 26,000 fighters) is associated with an increase in the risk of inter-rebel war of 0.1 percentage points. The same percentile shift for the number of security personnel (from to 590,000 to 1,300,000 troops), other things being equal, is associated with a reduction in the risk of inter-rebel war of 0.6 percentage points.

---

<sup>689</sup> The marginal effects are calculated on Stata with the Clarify package (Gary King, Michael Tomz and Jason Wittenberg, “Making the Most of Statistical Analyses: Improving Interpretation and Presentation,” *American Journal of Political Science* 44 (2), 2000: 347-61).

<sup>690</sup> The estimated probability of inter-rebel war in model 5 for a coethnic dyad with all other variables set at their median is 0.33 percentage points, while the corresponding risk for a non-coethnic dyad is almost an order of magnitude smaller (0.04).

**Table 6.4: Changes in the probability of inter-rebel war using Clarify**

Variable	First difference (percentage)	95 percent confidence interval	
Coethnic (model 3)	11.3	[2.7	28.1]
Coethnic (model 4)	10.4	[2.2	27.7]
Coethnic (model 5)	0.3	[0.003	1.3]
Balance (model 4)	-1.3	[-6.5	-0.05]
Overstretch (model 4)	-0.1	[-0.4	-0.02]
Military personnel (model 9)	-0.6	[-2.1	-0.1]

*Note:* The marginal effects for the non-dichotomous variables (*overstretch* and *military personnel*) are calculated for a change from the 50<sup>th</sup> to the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile of the variable. All variables are held at their median value for the estimation of the marginal effect of the variable of interest. As the package Clarify does not support the rare event logit model, the reported marginal effects are based on ordinary logit models, whose estimates in any case do not differ substantially from those obtained with rare event logits.

Table 6.5 reports a series of tests of minimum winning coalition theory's implication for inter-rebel war. The *hegemonic* dummy indicates whether the government is the strongest belligerent (i.e., it controls fifty-percent-plus-one of the total manpower of fighters in a civil war) and should have negative sign as rebel groups should refrain from infighting when facing a very powerful common enemy. The variable, however, has inconsistent sign and is not significant either in the bivariate specification or with the inclusion of various controls. By contrast, *coethnic* retains statistical significance in the models including *hegemonic*.

**Table 6.5: Testing minimum winning coalition theory**

Model	(11)	(12)	(13)	(14)	(15)
Hegemonic	-0.337 (-0.35)	0.606 (0.52)	0.309 (0.40)	-0.263 (-0.30)	-0.423 (-0.43)
Polity		-0.127* (-1.73)			
Anocracy			1.671* (1.94)		
Coethnic				1.283* (1.81)	2.277*** (3.02)
Extreme weakness					-0.976 (-1.05)
Balance					-1.424** (-2.31)
Overstretch					0.00001* (1.95)
Constant	-3.756*** (-5.95)	-4.243*** (-4.54)	-4.671*** (-5.19)	-4.094*** (-5.02)	-4.187*** (-2.88)
Observations	1089	979	1089	1089	979

*Note:* Rare-event logit with robust standard errors (Z values in parentheses)

\* significant at .1; \*\* significant at .05; \*\*\* significant at .01.

#### 4. Conclusions

The evidence presented above provides some confidence in the external validity of window theory. The fact that the positive sign for the coethnicity dummy is robust across specifications suggests that the pattern of coethnic rebel groups' propensity to infighting observed in the case studies is likely to characterize a broader set of civil wars than those analyzed in the previous chapters.

For the book project that will follow this dissertation, I intend to code two new variables, indicating, respectively, whether the members of a dyad share the same political ideology and

whether they were originally part of the same organization. The co-ideology variable would allow me to assess whether there is something specific about ethnicity or similar dynamics apply to rebel groups with overlapping bases of support defined in ideological terms. The splinter variable would permit me to directly address the omitted variable concern mentioned above: groups that emerge from the same “mother” organization are likely to be coethnic and may be prone to fighting each other due to the continuation of the conflict that brought about the split or tensions generated by the splintering process.

In any case, the qualitative evidence presented in the case studies provides strong reasons to believe that the association between coethnicity and inter-rebel war is not spurious – i.e., a mere reflection of the plausible link between splintering processes and inter-rebel fighting. First, all of the cases presented in the previous chapters feature dyads of rebel groups that fought each other but had not been part of the same organization originally: for example, the PUK and the Communist Party in Iraqi Kurdistan, the TPLF and its rivals in Tigray, the Maronite militias in Lebanon, the LTTE and the EPRLF in Sri Lanka, and ISIS and the array of groups pitted against it (apart from al-Nusra).

Second, and more crucial, the available evidence does not reveal different dynamics at play across dyads of rebel groups that originated from the same organization and those that did not: for example, the violent competition between the PUK and the Socialist Party (a PUK’s offshoot) mirrored relations between the PUK and the Communist Party; similarly, the ELF leadership set out to nip in the bud the fledgling ELM and the EPLF as it saw both as a challenge to its hegemonic role in the Eritrean liberation struggle, regardless of the fact that the former group did not emerge as a splinter from the ELF (in fact, it predated the ELF).

## Chapter 7

### Conclusions

Inter-rebel war generally entails enormous costs and risks for rebel groups. It diverts scarce resources from the fight against the government, which is typically the strongest belligerent; moreover, infighting risks to fatally weaken the insurgent movement, thus handing on a silver platter opportunities to make military gains and, in the worst case scenario, achieve outright victory to the incumbent. However, I argue, there are two scenarios in which the costs and risks of inter-rebel war are likely to be more than compensated by the resulting benefits – windows of opportunity and vulnerability.

Windows of opportunity are situations in which a rebel group faces weaker coethnic rivals and the government does not pose an immediate and serious threat. The strong group would thus be tempted to use force to eliminate its rivals, i.e., launch a hegemonic bid. The favorable balance of power and the limited threat posed by the government ensure that the risks and costs of infighting would be kept at acceptably low levels. On the other hand, coethnicity promises significant benefits: due to coethnic rebel organizations' overlapping bases of support, the group that comes out on top can typically absorb the resources previously under the control of the defeated rivals (in particular, their tax bases and recruitment pools); infighting can thus strengthen the victor, which would then be in a better position to face the government. Moreover, getting rid of coethnic rivals holds the promise of improving the threat environment of the would-be hegemon, as the other groups at some point down the road could have been tempted to use force.

Windows of vulnerability are situations in which a rebel group faces a mounting threat posed by coethnic rivals or a drastic decline of its power relative to those rivals, while the government poses an immediate and serious threat and/or the group does not occupy an especially favorable position in the inter-rebel balance of power. In this scenario, if no other solution appears feasible, the group would be tempted to resort to force or initiate a course of action likely to lead to war in a desperate attempt to overcome its predicament – i.e., gamble for resurrection.

The rest of this concluding chapter is organized as follows. Section 1 provides an overview of window theory's fit with the empirical evidence presented in the dissertation. Section 2 discusses window theory's relation to Realist theories of international politics. Section 3 draws policy implications for intervention in civil wars and counterinsurgency.

### **1. Window Theory's Empirical Record**

Overall, the empirical evidence presented in Chapters 3-6 of this dissertation provides strong, if still preliminary, support for window theory of inter-rebel war. In geo-political contexts as diverse as those surrounding the civil wars in Iraq, Ethiopia, Lebanon, Sri Lanka and Syria, rebel groups tend to fight each other when windows of opportunity or vulnerability are open, but tend to eschew infighting in the absence of windows. The available decision-making evidence (in particular for the Iraq and Ethiopia cases, for which I had access to former rebel leaders) indicates that rebel groups perceive the incentives provided by the environment in which they operate in ways consistent with window theory: they pay close attention to the inter-rebel balance of power and its trends as well as to government's military strength, resolve and strategy; they instrumentally use force to eliminate coethnic competitors in the rebel movement;

they bide their time when weak but growing; and they diligently search for alternatives to the use of force to deal with mounting threats or declines in relative power in situations in which infighting would be very costly or risky. Moreover, my statistical analysis of all rebel dyads in the post-Cold War era confirms window theory's observable implication that, other things being equal, coethnic rebel groups should be more likely to fight each other. Case study evidence also confirms that rebel groups can easily operate in areas previously controlled by coethnic rivals, they can recruit and extract resources from the local population and usually attract large segments of the defeated coethnic group's rank-and-file.

As Table 7.1 below shows, windows of opportunity seem to constitute the most common path to inter-rebel war: 12 instances of infighting out of a total of 24 episodes in my case studies are hegemonic bids primarily driven by window of opportunity logic.<sup>691</sup> I consider three additional fights as *potential* cases of hegemonic bids, as their broad outlines are consistent with window theory but I only have limited information or some features of the event in question are highly idiosyncratic.<sup>692</sup> Three episodes of inter-rebel war constitute gambles for resurrection prompted by windows of vulnerability.<sup>693</sup>

---

<sup>691</sup> TPLF vs. Teranafit may have also been driven by a window of vulnerability (see Chapter 4).

<sup>692</sup> LTTE vs. PLOT is an ambiguous case of hegemonic bid as the much weaker PLOT complied with the Tigers' ultimatum to leave the Jaffna peninsula after a limited show of force (the LTTE killed or disarmed several PLOT's members, including the group's military commander in Jaffna) and an earlier decisive defeat inflicted on another Tamil rebel group (TELO). The absence of large-scale fighting is puzzling for window theory as I generally do not expect rebel groups to just abandon the field when faced by a stronger rival without actually being defeated. Consistent with window of opportunity logic, the Amal vs. Hezbollah and Aoun's forces vs. Lebanese Forces episodes pitted coethnic rebel groups against each other in a context of limited government threat; however, the evidence suggesting the existence of a marked imbalance of power in favor of the initiator is very limited (also note that the Amal vs. Hezbollah case may amount to a combination of windows of opportunity and vulnerability as Amal may have been stronger when it attacked Hezbollah but its power advantage was rapidly fading). See Chapter 5 for details on these episodes.

<sup>693</sup> In Table 7.1., I consciously select on the dependent variable for presentation purposes; the case studies, however, trace the independent variables both when inter-rebel war occurs and when inter-rebel peace prevails.



**Table 7. 1: Summary of inter-rebel wars by type and outcome**

<u>Hegemonic bids</u>	<u>Outcome</u>
Barzani vs. Ahmed-Talabani, 1964	Success
ELF vs. ELM, 1965	Success
ELF vs. EPLF, 1972	Failure
ELF vs. ELF-PLF, 1978	Success
EPLF vs. ELF, 1980	Success
TPLF vs. TLF, 1975	Success
TPLF vs. Teranafit, 1976*	Success
TPLF vs. EPRP, 1978	Success
Phalanges vs. Tigers, 1980	Success
LTTE vs. TELO, 1986	Success
LTTE vs. EPRLF, 1986	Success
ISIS vs. anti-ISIS coalition, 2014	Partial success
<u>Resurrection gambles</u>	<u>Outcome</u>
PUK vs. KDP, 1978	Failure
PUK vs. National Democratic Front, 1983	Partial success
Anti-ISIS rebel coalition vs. ISIS, 2014	Failure
<u>Potential hegemonic bids</u>	<u>Outcome</u>
LTTE vs. PLOT, 1986	Success
Amal vs. Hezbollah, 1988*	Failure
Aoun's forces vs. Lebanese Forces, 1989	Partial success
<u>Failed predictions</u>	<u>Outcome</u>
EDU vs. TPLF, 1976	Attacker's defeat
TPLF vs. ELF, 1979	Attacker's victory
Amal & Progressive Socialist Party vs. Mourabitoun, 1985	Attackers' victory
Amal vs. Progressive Socialist Party & PLO, 1985	Attacker's failure
ISIS vs. Northern Storm, 2013	Attacker's success
<u>Indeterminate prediction</u>	<u>Outcome</u>
Al-Nusra vs. Hazm Movement and Syrian Revolutionary Front, 2014	Attacker's success

*Note:* This table reports all 24 instances of inter-rebel war encountered in the case studies in Chapters 3-5, divided by typology (hegemonic bids and resurrection gambles) or the extent to which window theory can explain them. "Outcome" refers to the observed results of inter-rebel war. For hegemonic bids, "success" means the attacker crushed its target(s), while "partial success" indicates that the initiator made significant battlefield gains but did not completely obliterate its rival(s); "failure" denotes cases in which the attacker did not apparently manage to even weaken its target(s). For resurrection gambles, "failure" indicates cases in which the initiator did not achieve any improvement in its position and was in fact weakened in the process; "partial success" is a situation in which the gamble for resurrection only addressed some of the sources of the initiator's vulnerability. For failed and indeterminate predictions, "attacker's defeat" and "attacker's victory" indicate, respectively, instances in which the target of the attack militarily defeated the initiator and vice versa; "attacker's failure" is a situation in which the attacker did not even achieve the objective of weakening the target(s), which would constitute "attacker's success." \* denotes cases where both windows of opportunity and vulnerability were likely present.

The relative prevalence of hegemonic bids is unsurprising: rebel groups tend to eagerly exploit temporary advantages in the balance of power or improvements in the threat environment to expand the resources at their disposal and get rid of threatening rivals on the cheap. By contrast, rebel groups embark on gambles for resurrection reluctantly, only after making sure that no alternative solution to their relative decline or the mounting threat they face exists – after all, to paraphrase, Otto von Bismarck, insurgents don't commit suicide for fear of death.

Also unsurprisingly, hegemonic bids tend to be successful. Out of the 12 clear-cut instances of hegemon bid, the initiator of the attack achieved the goal of getting rid of its weaker rivals in 10 cases, while only one episode represents an outright failure, as the initiator did not even manage to weaken its rival (ELF vs. EPLF, 1972); the episode involving ISIS and a broad coalition of Syrian insurgent groups from the summer of 2014 amounts to a mixed success, as ISIS managed to wrest substantial amount of territory from its rivals but did not crush them. By contrast, two out of three gambles for resurrection resulted in failure: in 1978, the KDP dealt a serious blow to the PUK when the latter tried to establish a supply route to Syria near the KDP's stronghold; and the anti-ISIS coalition failed to defeat ISIS, which then managed to recuperate and become much stronger. The PUK's attack on the groups of the National Democratic Front (the KDP, the Socialist Party and the Communist Party) in 1983 represents a partial success, as the PUK expelled its rivals from the group's stronghold but continued to be in such a vulnerable position that shortly afterwards it had to seek an accommodation with the Iraqi government.

### ***Unexplained cases of inter-rebel war***

The case studies identify five instances of inter-rebel war that window theory predicts should *not* have taken place and one instance in which the theory does not make a specific prediction. Four

of the failed predictions occurred across ethnic lines (rather than within, as the coethnicity hypothesis suggests), while the fifth one saw ISIS attack the Free Syrian Army-affiliated Northern Brigade in a context in which the former was growing stronger but did not have enough power vis-à-vis the overall rebel movement to launch a hegemonic bid.

These failed predictions are important reminders of both the probabilistic nature of my claims and of the need for future work aimed at identifying additional hypotheses and refining scope conditions. But it is also important to point out that the features of these episodes of inter-rebel war significantly mitigate their impact as falsification blows for window theory.

Before turning to a discussion of each of the five failed predictions, the instance of inter-rebel war that is not predicted by window theory but also does not contradict it (hence its label as “indeterminate prediction” in Table 7.1) should be mentioned – the al-Nusra’s attack on the Hazm Movement and the Syrian Revolutionary Front in late 2014-early 2015. We would not expect Syria’s al-Qaeda affiliate to engage in inter-rebel aggression at that time, given that it was already involved in a difficult two-front war against ISIS and the Syrian government. However, the two groups were also receiving significant military support from the United States, which was conducting bombing operations against al-Nusra. This fact implies that al-Nusra and its two targets were simultaneously on the same side of a war (against Assad’s regime and ISIS) and on opposite sides (in the US campaign against the al-Qaeda affiliate); in this kind of intricate situation, window theory would not make a specific prediction about al-Nusra’s behavior towards the two groups.

EDU vs. TPLF. The fight between EDU and TPLF is anomalous as it involved two groups coded as non-coethnic, due to the EDU’s ethnically mixed membership and its political agenda not explicitly focused on Tigray (unlike the TPLF’s). However, both groups successfully

recruited Tigrayan peasants in their ranks and thus effectively competed over a common pool of resources. It thus seems plausible that, in the specific political context of Tigray in the wake of the collapse of imperial authority, the EDU had enough of a Tigrayan character (due its connection to the symbolic Tigrayan leader Ras Mengesha) to trigger the kinds of competitive dynamics with the TPLF that I expect to characterize relations between coethnic groups. Generating some “false negatives” may well be an inevitable drawback of adopting sufficiently abstract and general coding criteria to sooth concerns about “retroactive” coding and falsifiability.

*TPLF vs. ELF.* The other episode of inter-rebel war between non-coethnics in Ethiopia pitted the TPLF against the ELF. The two groups clashed first in Tigray, when the TPLF intercepted an ELF’s contingent escorting EPRP’s survivors from an earlier encounter with the TPLF, and then in Eritrea, when the TPLF helped its Eritrean ally – the EPLF – in the latter’s hegemonic bid against the ELF. Without a doubt, this is an instance of inter-rebel taking place across ethnic lines. However, the dynamics of the case suggests the existence of a mechanism that, while not envisioned by window theory, does not contradict it – the transmission of intra-ethnic disputes to non-coethnic dyads through a system of inter-ethnic alliances (a variant of the logic of “the friend of my enemy is my enemy”). Both the TPLF and the ELF forged relations with rebel groups across the Tigray-Eritrea ethnic divide: the TPLF cooperated with the EPLF for a long period of time, while the ELF, bereft of other allies in Tigray, eventually provided help to the EPRP. As tensions between coethnic rebel groups (expected by window theory) escalated, the ELF and the TPLF found themselves dragged into a fight across ethnic lines on the side of their allies.

*Amal & Progressive Socialist Party vs. Mourabitoun; Amal vs. Progressive Socialist Party & PLO.* In 1985, Lebanon's Shia group Amal was involved in two episodes of infighting that unambiguously occurred across ethnic lines. First, it ganged up with the Druze Progressive Socialist Party against the Sunni Mourabitoun militia; then it fought against the joint forces of the Progressive Socialist Party and the PLO. As I have argued at some length in Chapter 5, these episodes took place in the context of a deep stalemate – a situation in which neither side in the broader civil war had a reasonable prospect of making significant gains on the battlefield, let alone achieve outright military victory. Under these circumstances, the structural constraints to inter-rebel war across ethnic lines (namely, prohibitively high costs and serious risks) envisioned by my theory are likely to be relatively weak and thus we should expect to observe episodes of inter-rebel war caused by other factors, such as the prospect of even modest marginal gains, third-parties' incitement and idiosyncratic impulses like personality clashes and ideological differences. Future empirical research will need to assess whether deep stalemates are in fact a valid scope condition of window theory by examining a wider range of cases.

*ISIS vs. Northern Storm.* When ISIS attacked the Free Syrian Army's affiliate Northern Storm in September 2013, the former's power was on the rise, but the group was probably not strong enough to launch a hegemonic bid against the entire rebel movement, i.e., ISIS was not facing a window of opportunity. Circumstantial evidence, however, suggests that ISIS may have intended to fight a limited war with the weaker Northern Storm for control of Azaz, a town on the border with Turkey that the rebel movement used as a gateway to the outside world, without provoking a broader war with other groups. If this interpretation is correct, the ISIS' attack would constitute a variant of the salami tactics discussed several times in this dissertation: a

limited use of force to gain a marginal advantage over rivals without initiating all-out war, which, however, does carry some risk of inadvertent escalation.<sup>694</sup>

### 3. Which Realism?

Window theory clearly belongs to the Realist paradigm, given its depiction of inter-rebel relations as a competition for power and security in anarchic environment.<sup>695</sup> It is nonetheless helpful to discuss similarities and differences between my argument and various theories in the realist family.

Window theory is a structural or systemic argument (like Waltz' and Mearsheimer's), as it explains the behavior of rebel groups as a function of the incentives provided by the environment (the "system") to "units" that, at a minimum, are interested in their survival and in advancing their political-military struggle against the government. The structure in which rebel groups are immersed, however, is not made up of material factors only, but also ideational ones – namely, a set of inter-subjective identities possessed by the various civil war belligerents. Identities are typically multi-dimensional and they are socially constructed, but these facts do not make their effects less real. Complex political processes (and violence across ethnic lines, in particular) make certain identities highly salient, so that they become very "sticky" during civil

---

<sup>694</sup> The fact that ISIS' attack was apparently aimed at taking over a border crossing suggests a possible direction for future research on resource cumulativity and inter-rebel war. Assets like border passes (in particular, in contexts in which rebels' access to the outside world is tightly restricted) and natural resources (e.g., oil fields and diamond-rich areas) may offer major benefits to armed actors that control the corresponding pieces of real estate, regardless of the ethnic background of the local population. Thus these kinds of "hyper-cumulable" resources may bring about inter-rebel war even in situations in which window theory would expect rebel groups to abstain from it.

<sup>695</sup> Robert G. Gilpin, "The Richness of the Tradition of Political Realism," *International Organization* 38 (2), 1984: 287-304.

wars and powerfully shape the behavior of individuals and rebel groups – “they confront actors as objective social facts with real, objective ‘material’ effects.”<sup>696</sup>

Shared ethno-national identity (coethnicity) both whets rebel groups’ expansionary appetites and fuels their security concerns. The existence of overlapping bases of support means that inter-rebel aggression can succeed on the cheap and enable the victor’s acquisition of more resources. In this context, even groups that would in principle prefer to not get involved in infighting may opt for the use of force when an opportunity emerges, lest they are victimized down the road under changed circumstances. Disentangling predatory and security-seeking motives is made even more complicated by the presence of the other civil war side – the government. Inter-rebel aggression motivated by a group’s desire to expand (rather than preventive self-defense from a rival) may be deeply rooted in the fear induced by the incumbent’s overwhelming power and the ensuing realization that more resources are needed to deal with it.

The fact that window theory envisions rebel groups as harboring mixed motives does not place it in either camp in the debate between offensive and defensive realists. Jack Snyder made this point convincingly:

“Both offensive and defensive realists believe that states are motivated by both expansionist and security goals. To some extent it is a debate about the incentives that international anarchy creates for states. Offensive realists tend to believe that offensive action is more necessary for self-defense than defensive realists believe it is, but the two schools’ divergence on this point should not be exaggerated... This is a dispute not about theoretical principles but about empirical probabilities. It is as if defensive realists think

---

<sup>696</sup> Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 95.

the offensive glass is 20 percent full and the offensive realists think it is 30 percent full.”<sup>697</sup>

In this sense, when coethnic rebel groups are in physical proximity, window theory depicts a world that more closely resembles the one envisioned by offensive realists, in which security is scarce, calculated aggression often pays off and thus even insurgents that are mostly motivated by fear and security concerns tend to behave as expansionists. The conflict of interest between coethnics is real and typically does not merely result from interactions fraught with misperceptions: the combination of anarchy and cumutable resources provides rebel groups with strong incentives to undertake offensive initiatives. Negative interactions (like the skirmishes that so often characterize relations between coethnic rebel groups not engaged in all-out war against each other) can certainly make things worse by enhancing threat perception; but to an important extent they represent the mechanisms through which rebel groups concretely grasp structural imperatives (i.e., they understand the logic of the situation) and reveal, rather than cause, underlying conflict.

Some situations encountered in the case studies do more closely resemble defensive realists’ spiral dynamics. In particular, when weak rebel groups form a defensive alliance to balance against a stronger organization, the latter may not help but perceive a deterioration of its threat environment. This sort of hostile encirclement can contribute to the emergence of windows of vulnerability and inter-rebel war, as in the case of the 1983 PUK’s attack on the National Democratic Front. It should be noted, however, that this is a “deep” security dilemma, a situation

---

<sup>697</sup> Jack L. Snyder and Keir A. Lieber, “Correspondence: Defensive Realism and the ‘New’ History of World War I,” *International Security* 33 (1), 2008: 174-94, pp. 181 and 183.



in which hardly any attempt at showing good will can really convince the other without exposing one to really serious risks and that is thus extremely difficult to escape.<sup>698</sup>

#### **4. Policy Implications**

Understanding the causes of inter-rebel war is clearly important for policy. Civilian and military decision-makers will typically want to be informed about the likelihood of infighting and available options to induce cooperation or conflict between rebels when contemplating intervention in ongoing civil wars or choosing counterinsurgency strategies. Window theory and the empirical evidence presented in this dissertation offer several important insights for policymakers dealing with challenges associated with civil war termination, counterinsurgency and external interventions.

First, and perhaps most obvious, window theory identifies a set of specific factors that affect the risk of inter-rebel war and that, therefore, policy-makers should pay close attention to. The argument and supporting evidence do more than simply reminding policymakers that both power and identity matter: they point to a particular power-driven logic of inter-rebel war and correspondingly cast doubt on alternative arguments (e.g., minimum winning coalition logic). Policymakers are probably more receptive than most political scientists to the notion that ethno-national identities, far from being epiphenomenal, powerfully affect civil war dynamics. But this dissertation cautions them against inferring from the power of ethnic identity that coethnic rebel groups will tend to cooperate. In fact, the forces that push individuals to favor coethnics and cooperate at higher rates with them (i.e., to display ethnic parochialism) spur rebel groups with overlapping bases of support into fighting each other. The point that ethno-national rebel movements should not be treated as monoliths is perhaps not particularly surprising in the wake

---

<sup>698</sup> Robert Jervis, "Was the Cold War a Security Dilemma?", *Journal of Cold War Studies* 3 (1), 2001: 36–60.

of the fight between ISIS and al-Nusra in Syria in 2014-15 – two groups appealing to the same Sunni Arab constituency. This dissertation, however, advises against explaining away this episode as a mere reflection of the fanaticism of ISIS – a “group too extreme even for Al-Qaida”:<sup>699</sup> coethnic groups tend to fight each other in a broad range of cases and the ideological outlooks of the two organizations are hardly distinguishable (which is not surprising given that the Islamic State of Iraq – ISIS’ predecessor – created al-Nusra in 2011).

Second, policymakers should not be too sanguine about easily influencing inter-rebel relations, as their leverage is limited and there are serious risks of unintended results. Interveners and local governments could in principle persuade rebel groups to fight each other or cooperate by promising rewards or threatening punishment. However, there is little evidence consistent with the implied conception of rebel groups as pawns in the hands of experienced government chess masters. In fact, the case studies suggest that rebel groups do not tend to do governments’ bidding if that entails a significant deviation from their preferred course of action. For example, the Sudanese government’s efforts to make the Eritrean fronts reconcile went nowhere; New Delhi did not manage to prevent fighting between the Sri Lankan Tamil; and the United States largely failed to convince much of Syria’s Sunni rebel movement to distance itself from al-Nusra.

Third, the dynamics postulated by window theory pose major constraints to governments’ ability to foster the growth of favorite rebel groups and weaken especially unpalatable ones. Leaving aside operational difficulties involved in ensuring limited spill-over of aid to other organizations, selectively providing support to a subset of rebel groups – i.e., “picking winners” – risks creating windows of vulnerability for other groups, which could then respond by

---

<sup>699</sup> Krishnadev Calamur, “ISIS: An Islamist Group Too Extreme Even For Al-Qaida,” NPR, 13 June, 2004 (available at <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2014/06/13/321665375/isis-an-islamist-group-too-extreme-even-for-al-qaida>, last accessed on June 25, 2015).

attacking the beneficiaries.<sup>700</sup> Similarly, the prospect of direct external military intervention (with airpower or ground forces) in support of a subset of rebel groups may be perceived by other groups as a mounting threat, which can warrant the use of force to weaken the local allies of the intervener. For example, Tehran's support for the KDP and direct intervention in Iraqi Kurdistan prompted the PUK's gamble for resurrection in 1983; a similar dynamic may have been at play in al-Nusra's attack on the main recipients of US military aid among Syrian insurgents – the Hazm Movement and the Syrian Revolutionary Front – when the United States started bombing the al-Qaeda's affiliate in 2014. This is not to say that picking winners is doomed to failure, but that the would-be interveners should incorporate in their plans measures to counter the unintended effects suggested by windows theory (e.g., avoid slow and gradual interventions in support of local allies, so as to reduce the risk that local opponents would have enough time to crush them).

Given that rebel groups are highly responsive to the opening and closing of windows of opportunity and vulnerability, one may reasonably wonder whether governments could indirectly influence the behavior of rebel groups in desired directions, by manipulating the factors that give rise to windows. However, several considerations suggest limited leeway here too. Local governments could create windows of opportunity by providing weapons or money to some groups and reducing military pressure on them, thus creating a permissive threat environment for infighting. However, whether rebel groups would take the bait remains an open question, as they may fear an opportunistic government attack when the insurgent movement is the throes of

---

<sup>700</sup> On the pick-a-winner strategy in civil war interventions, see Daniel Byman and Taylor Seybolt, "Humanitarian Intervention in Communal Civil War," *Security Studies* 13 (1), 2003: 33-78. Paul Staniland suggests another constraint to this strategy, represented by the aid recipients' organizational cohesion and corresponding ability to channel the inflows of resources to further sustainable growth rather than bringing about organizational implosion (*Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).

infighting; in the case studies presented in this dissertation, the limited government threat associated with hegemonic bids tended to be a function of hard-to-fake government's political or military constraints to power-projection, rather than clever maneuvers. Creating a window of vulnerability by providing support to a subset of rebel groups (i.e., something observationally similar to picking a winner) may be the most effective way to provoke infighting, but when this strategy is adopted by a local government it runs into the problem of limited willingness on the part of rebel groups to be seen as colluding with the enemy<sup>701</sup> and may also entail significant political costs for the incumbent in the form of outbidding efforts by hardliners on the government's side. External interveners may be in a better position to trigger and sustain inter-rebel war by appearing to be picking winners and then adjusting the level and direction of support to ensure that no group comes out on top. This strategy, however, would be sensible only if the third-parties' goal is in fact simply promoting infighting rather than propping up a local ally or weakening an enemy. Moreover, there is no guarantee that inter-rebel war would continue if the rebel groups realize they are stuck in a costly stalemate that is only serving someone else's interests.

In sum, window theory does not provide policymakers with ready-made blueprints for action. It does, however, provide them with a framework to think about the specific policy challenge they may be facing, it distills key causal factors, it identifies corresponding potential policy leverages, and it cautions against the risk of unintended results.

---

<sup>701</sup> Paul Staniland, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Insurgent Fratricide, Ethnic Defection, and the Rise of Pro-State Paramilitaries," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56 (1), 2012a: 16-40.

## Bibliography

Abbay, Alemseged, *Identity Jilted or Re-imagining Identity? The Divergent Paths of the Eritrean and Tigrayan Nationalist Struggles* (Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1998).

Abraham, Antoine J., *The Lebanon War* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996).

Achen, Christopher H., "Let's Put Garbage-Can Regressions and Probits Where They Belong," *Conflict Management and Peace Research* 22 (4), 2005: 327–39.

Adamson, David, *The Kurdish War* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1964).

Akcinaroglu, Seden, "Rebel Interdependencies and Civil War Outcomes," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56 (5), 2012: 879-903.

"Al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria: a Cold War in Raqqa," *Damascus Bureau*, December 18, 2013 (available at <http://www.damascusbureau.org/?p=6176>, last accessed on June 15, 2015).

Alam, Asadollah, *The Shah and I: The Confidential Diary of Iran's Royal Court, 1969-1977* (New York: Tauris, 1991).

Al-Marashi, Ibrahim and Sammy Salama, *Iraq's Armed Forces: An Analytical History* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

Al-Tamimi, Aymenn Jawad, "The Dawn of the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 16, Hudson Institute, 2014a.

Al-Tamimi, Aymenn Jawad, "Special Report: Northern Storm and the Situation in Azaz (Syria)," *Middle East Review of International Affairs/MERIA Journal* 28 (4), 2014b.

Aregawi, Berhe, *A Political History of the Tigray People's Liberation Front: Revolt, Ideology, and Mobilization in Ethiopia* (Los Angeles: Tsehai, 2009).

Arriola, Leonardo R., "Capital and Opposition in Africa: Coalition Building in Multiethnic Societies," *World Politics* 65 (2), 2013: 233–72.

Ashim, Ahmed S., *When Counterinsurgency Wins: Sri Lanka's Defeat of the Tamil Tiger* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

Avon, Dominique, *Hezbollah: A History of the "Party of God"* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

Azani, Eitan, *The Story of the Party of God: From Revolution to Institutionalization* (New York: Palgrave, 2009).

Badran, Tony, "Lebanon's Militia Wars," in Barry Rubin, ed., *Lebanon: Liberation, Conflict and Crisis* (New York: Palgrave, 2009).

Bakke, Kristin M., Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham and Lee J. M. Seymour. "A Plague of Initials: Fragmentation, Cohesion and Infighting in Civil Wars," *Perspectives on Politics* 10 (2), 2012: 265-83.

Balanche, Fabrice, "L'Inflexible Progression del'Etat Islamique," *Libération*, 3 October, 2014a.

Balanche, Fabrice "Insurrection, Contre-insurrection et Communautés," *Geostrategic Maritime Review* 4, 2014b.

Balanche, Fabrice, "L'Insurrection Syrienne et la Guerre des Cartes," *OrientXXI*, 24 October 2013 (available at <http://orientxxi.info/magazine/l-insurrection-syrienne-et-la.0397>, last accessed on June 20, 2015).

Balcells, Laia and Patricia Justino, "Bridging Micro and Macro Approaches on Civil Wars and Political Violence: Issues, Challenges, and the Way Forward," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 58 (8), 2014: 1343-59.

Balcells, Laia and Stathis N. Kalyvas, "Does Warfare Matter?, Severity, Duration, and Outcomes of Civil Wars," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 58 (8), 2014: 1390-418.

Bapat, Navin A. and Kanisha D. Bond, "Alliances between Militant Groups," *British Journal of Political Science* 42 (4), 2012: 793-824.

Barnard, Anne and Tim Arango, "Using Violence and Persuasion, ISIS Makes Political Gains," *New York Times*, 3 June, 2015.

Barnard, Anne, "Assad's Forces May Be Aiding New ISIS Surge," *New York Times*, 2 June, 2015.

Barnard, Anne, "Dual Threat Has Mainstream Syrian Rebels Fearing Demise: Facing Both ISIS Militants and Bashar al-Assad's Forces in Syria," *New York Times*, 15 August, 2014.

Basil, Yousuf, Mohammed Tawfeeq and Ray Sanchez, "Al Qaeda Boss Ayman al-Zawahiri Calls for Halt to Jihadist Infighting," CNN, 3 May, 2014, available at <http://www.cnn.com/2014/05/03/world/meast/ayman-al-zawahiri-message-syria/>, last accessed on June 21, 2015).

Batatu, Hanna, "Shi'i Organizations in Iraq: Ad-Da'wah al-Islamiyah and al-Mujahidin," in Juan R. I. Cole and Nikki R. Keddie, eds., *Shi'ism and Social Protest* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986).

Bates, Robert H., "Ethnic Competition and Modernization in Contemporary Africa," *Comparative Political Studies* 6 (4), 1974: 457-84.

Beckmann, Matthew N. and Richard L. Hall, "Elite Interviewing in Washington DC," in Layna Mosley, ed., *Interview Research in Political Science* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).

Behera, Navnita Chadha, *Demystifying Kashmir* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2006), p. 167.

Bell, Bowyer J., "The Armed Struggle and Underground Intelligence: An Overview," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 17 (2), 1994: 115-50.

Bell, Bowyer J., "Endemic Insurgency and International Order: The Eritrean Experience," *Orbis* 18 (20), 1974: 427-50.

Bengio, Ofra, *The Kurds of Iraq: Building a State Within a State* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2012).

Bennett, Andrew, "Process Tracing and Causal Inference," in Henry E. Brady and David Collier, eds., *Rethinking Social Inquiry: Diverse Tools, Shared Standards* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010).

Bereket, Habte Selassie, *The Crown and the Pen: The Memoirs of a Lawyer Turned Rebel* (Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 2007).

Bereketeab, Redie, *Eritrea: Making of a Nation* (Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 2007).

Biddle, Stephen, Jeffrey A. Friedman and Jacob N. Shapiro, "Testing the Surge: Why did Violence Decline in Iraq in 2007?" *International Security* 37 (1), 2012: 1-34.

Biddle, Stephen, "Allies, Airpower, and Modern Warfare: The Afghan Model in Afghanistan and Iraq," *International Security* 30 (3), 2005/06: 161-76.

Biddle, Stephen, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

Birnir, Jóhanna Kristín, *Ethnicity and Electoral Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

Blainey, Geoffrey, *Causes of War* (New York: Free Press, 1973).

Blank, Hartmut, Jochen Musch and Rüdiger F. Pohl, "Hindsight Bias: On Being Wise After the Event," *Social Cognition* 25 (1), 2007: 1-9.

Bleich, Eric and Robert Pekkanen, "How to Report Interview Research," in Layna Mosley, ed., *Interview Research in Political Science* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).

Bornstein, Gary, "Intergroup Conflict: Individual, Group, and Collective Interests," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 7 (2), 2003: 129-45.



Borovali, Ali-Fouat, "Kurdish Insurgencies, the Gulf War, and Turkey's Changing Role," *Conflict Quarterly*, fall 1987: 29-45.

Boserup, Rasmus Alenius, "Collective Violence and Counter-state Building", in Bruce Kapferer and Bjorn Enge Bertelsen, eds., *Crisis of the State: War and Social Upheaval* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009).

Bowles, Samuel, "Did Warfare Among Ancestral Hunter-Gatherers Affect the Evolution of Human Social Behaviors?", *Science* 324, 2009: 1293-8.

Bradley, Margaret M., "Emotional Memory: A Dimensional Analysis," in Stephanie H. M. van Goozen, Nanne E. Van de Poll and Joseph A. Sergeant, eds., *Emotions: Essays on Emotion Theory* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1994).

Brooks, Stephen G. and William C. Wohlforth, "From Old Thinking to New Thinking in Qualitative Research," *International Security* 26 (4), 2002: 93-111.

Brubaker, Rogers, "Ethnicity Without Groups," *European Journal of Sociology* 43 (2), 2002: 163-89;

Bueno de Mesquita, Ethan, "Terrorist Factions," *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 3 (4), 2008: 399-418.

Bueno de Mesquita, Ethan, "Conciliation, Counterterrorism, and Patterns of Terrorist Violence," *International Organization* 59 (1), 2005: 145-76.

Bulloch, John and Harvey Morris, *No Friends But the Mountains: The Tragic History of the Kurds* (London: Viking, 1992).

Burg, Steven L. and Paul S. Shoup, *The War in Bosnia Herzegovina: Ethnic Conflict and International Intervention* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1999).

Byman, Daniel and Taylor Seybolt, "Humanitarian Intervention in Communal Civil War," *Security Studies* 13 (1), 2003: 33-78

Byman, Daniel, *Understanding Proto-Insurgency* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2007).

Calamur, Krishnadev, "ISIS: An Islamist Group Too Extreme Even For Al-Qaida," NPR, 13 June, 2004 (available at <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2014/06/13/321665375/isis-an-islamist-group-too-extreme-even-for-al-qaida>, last accessed on June 25, 2015).

Caris, Charles C. and Samuel Reynolds, "ISIS Governance in Syria," *Middle East Security Report* 22, Institute for the Study of War, 2014.

Central Bureau of Foreign Relations of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front, *Adulis* 1(4-5), October-November 1984.

Chakravarti, Sudeep, *Red Sun: Travels in Naxalite Country* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2008).

Chandra, Kanchan, ed., *Constructivist Theories of Ethnic Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Chandra, Kanchan, "What Is An Ethnic Party?" *Party Politics* 17 (2), 2011: 151-69.

Chandra, Kanchan, "What Is Ethnic Identity and Does It Matter?" *Annual Review of Political Science* 9, 2006: 397-424

Chandra, Kanchan, *Why Ethnic Parties Succeed: Patronage and Ethnic Head Counts in India* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

Chandra, Kanchan, "Cumulative Findings in the Study of Ethnic Politics," *APSA-CP* 12 (1), 2001: 7-11.

Choi, Jung-Kyoo and Samuel Bowles, "The Coevolution of Parochial Altruism and War," *Science* 318, 2007: 636-40.

Christensen, Thomas J. and Jack L. Snyder, "Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity," *International Organization* 44 (2), 1990: 137-68.

Christia, Fotini, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

Chubin, Shahram and Charles Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1988).

Clapham, Christopher, "The International Politics of African Guerrilla Movements," *South African Journal of International Affairs* 3 (1), 1995: 81-91.

Clapham, Christopher S., *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

Clarance, William, *Ethnic Warfare in Sri Lanka and the UN Crisis* (London: Pluto Press, 2007).

Clark, Janine A., "Field Research Methods in the Middle East," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 39 (3), 2006: 417-22.

Cockburn, Patrick, "ISIS Consolidates," *London Review of Books* 36 (16), 2014: 3-5.

Collier, David, "Understanding Process Tracing," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 44 (4), 2011: 823-30.

Conflict Records Research Center, CRRC, Saddam Hussein collection.

Connable, Ben and Martin C. Libicki, *How Insurgencies End* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2010).

Connell, Dan and Tom Killion, *Historical Dictionary of Eritrea* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2011).

Connell, Dan, *Conversations with Eritrean Political Prisoners* (Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 2005).

Connell, Dan, *Against All Odds: A Chronicle of the Eritrean Revolution* (Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1993).

Connell, Dan, "Nationalist Groups Pose Direct Threat to Ethiopia Regime", *The Boston Globe*, 6 September, 1980.

Connell, Dan, "Ethiopian Army Poised for New Ogaden Guerrilla Assault," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 29 July, 1980.

Connell, Dan, "Eritrea: Guerrilla Offensive," *The Guardian*, 19 December, 1979.

Connell, Dan, "Eritrean Forces Resume Guerrilla Attacks," *The Guardian*, 3 January, 1979.

Connell, Dan, "Ethiopia Prepares Eritrea Offensive," *The Guardian*, 22 November, 1978.

Connell, Dan, "Eritrean Struggle Nears Turning Point," *The Guardian*, 24 May, 1978.

Connell, Dan, "Eritrean Liberation Struggle Escalates," *The Guardian*, 6 July, 1977.

Copeland, Dale C., *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000).

Copeland, Dale C., "Neorealism and the Myth of Bipolar Stability: Toward a New Dynamic Realist Theory of Major War," *Security Studies* 5 (3), 1996: 29-89.

Cordesman, Anthony H. and Abraham R. Wagner, *The Lessons of Modern War, Volume II: The Iran-Iraq War* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990).

Corstange, Daniel, *The Price of a Vote: Ethnicity and Clientelism in the Middle East*, 2013, book manuscript, Columbia University.

Coser, Lewis A., *The Functions of Social Conflict* (New York: Free Press, 1956).

Crawford, Timothy W., "Preventing Enemy Coalitions: How Wedge Strategies Shape Power Politics," *International Security*, 35 (4), 2011: 155-189.

Cunningham, David, Kristian Gleditsch and Idean Salehyan, "It Takes Two: A Dyadic Analysis of Civil War Duration and Outcome," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 53 (4), 2009: 570-97.

Cunningham, Kathleen Gallagher, Kristin M. Bakke and Lee J. M. Seymour, "Shirts Today, Skins Tomorrow: Dual Contests and the Effects of Fragmentation in Self-Determination Disputes," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56 (1), 2012: 67-93.

Dagher, Sam and Maria Abi-Habib, "Fighting Among Rebels Boosts Syrian Regime," *Wall Street Journal*, 13 January, 2014.

Darden, Keith, *Resisting Occupation: Mass Schooling and the Creation of Durable National Loyalties* (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

Davies, H. J., "Spies as Informants: Triangulation and Interpretation of Elite Interview Data in the Study of Intelligence and Security Services," *Politics* 21 (1), 2001: 73-80.

Dawit, Wolde Giorgis, *Red Tears: War, Famine and Revolution in Ethiopia* (Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1989).

De Figueiredo, Rui and Barry R. Weingast, "The Rationality of Fear: Political Opportunism and Ethnic Conflict," in Barbara F. Walter and Jack L. Snyder, eds., *Civil Wars, Insecurity, and Intervention* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

Dougherty, Beth K. and Edmund A. Ghareb, *Historical Dictionary of Iraq* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2013).

Dovidio, John F. and Samuel L. Gaertner, "Ingroup Bias," in Susan T. Fiske, Daniel T. Gilbert and Gardner Lindzey, eds., *Handbook of Social Psychology* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2010).

Downs, George W. and David M. Rocke, *Optimal Imperfection? Domestic Uncertainty and Institutions in International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

Eck, Kristine, "Fighting Our Friends Instead of Our Enemies," working paper, 2010.

ELF, *Eritrean Newsletter* 44, 1 September, 1981.

Elrich, Haggai, *The Struggle Over Eritrea, 1962-1978* (Stanford: Hoover Press Publication, 1983).

Enloe, Cynthia H., *Ethnic Soldiers: State Security in Divided Societies* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1980).

Entessar, Nader, *Kurdish Politics in the Middle* (East Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010).

EPLF, "Ethiopia's sixth offensive and developments in the Eritrean struggle," 25 August, 1982.

Evron, Yair, *War and Intervention in Lebanon: the Israeli-Syrian Deterrence Dialogue* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

Farid, Asasard, *Political Atlas of Kurdistan Region, 1914-2005* (Iraqi Kurdistan, 2010).

Fazal, Tanisha, "State Death in the International System," *International Organization* 58 (2), 2004: 311-44.

Fearon, James D. and David D. Laitin, "Integrating Qualitative and Quantitative Methods," in Janet M. Box-Steffensmeier, Henry E. Brady and David Collier, eds., *Oxford Handbook of Political Methodology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008)

Fearon, James D. and David D. Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War," *American Political Science Review* 97 (1), 2003: 75-90

Fearon, James D. and David D. Laitin, "Violence and the Social Construction of Ethnic Identity," *International Organization* 54 (4), 2000: 845-77.

Fearon, James D., "Why Ethnic Politics and 'Pork' Tend to Go Together," presented at a MacArthur Foundation-sponsored conference on Ethnic Politics and Democratic Stability, Chicago, May 1999.

Fearon, James D., "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization* 49 (3), 1995: 379-414.

Ferree, Karen F., "Explaining South Africa Racial Census," *The Journal of Politics* 68 (4), 2006: 803-15, 2008.

Fischhoff, Baruch, "Hindsight≠Foresight: The Effect of Outcome Knowledge on Judgment Under Uncertainty," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance* 1 (3), 1975: 288-99.

Fisk, Robert, *Pity the Nation: The Abduction of Lebanon* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1990).

Fjelde, Hanne and Desirée Nilsson, "Rebels against Rebels: Explaining Violence between Rebel Groups," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56 (4), 2012: 604-28.

Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1976, volume XXVII, Iran, Iraq, 1973-1976, Documents 275-6, 279.

Fortna, Virginia Page, *Does Peacekeeping Work? Shaping Belligerents' Choices After Civil War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

Fraiman, Keren and Austin Long, "When Failed States Succeed: Assessing Weak State Capacity and Choice to Confront Violent Non-state Actors," working paper, 2014.

Franck, Raphael and Ilia Rainer, "Does the Leader's Ethnicity Matter? Ethnic Favoritism, Education, and Health in Sub-Saharan Africa," *American Political Science Review* 106 (2), 2012: 294-325.

Frieden, Jeffrey, "Actors and Preferences in International Relations," in David A. Lake and Robert Powell, eds., *Strategic Choice and International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

“From the Experiences of the Eritrean Liberation Army” (available at [http://www.nharnet.com/Editorials/TodayinEriHistory/NharnetTeam\\_Jan13.htm](http://www.nharnet.com/Editorials/TodayinEriHistory/NharnetTeam_Jan13.htm), accessed on 18 June, 2014).

Fuji, Lee Ann, “The Puzzle of Extra-Lethal Violence,” *Perspectives on Politics* 11 (2), 2013: 410-26.

Galula, David, *Counter-insurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: Praeger, 1964).

Gamson, William A. and David S. Meyer, “Framing Political Opportunity,” in Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald, *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

Gartenstein-Ross, Daveed, “How Many Fighters does the Islamic State Really Have?” *War on the Rock*, February 9, 2015, available at <http://warontherocks.com/2015/02/how-many-fighters-does-the-islamic-state-really-have/>, last accessed on June 18, 2015).

George, Alexander L. and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theories Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

Gerring, John and Rose McDermott, “An Experimental Template for Case Study Research,” *American Journal of Political Science* 51(3), 2007: 688-701.

Ghareeb, Edmund, *The Kurdish Question in Iraq* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University, 1981).

Gilmour, David, *Lebanon: The Fractured Country* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1983).

Gilpin, Robert G., “The Richness of the Tradition of Political Realism,” *International Organization* 38 (2), 1984: 287-304.

Ginges, Jeremy and Scott Atran, “What Motivates Participation in Violent Political Action: Selective Incentives or Parochial Altruism?”, *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1167, 2009: 115-23.



Gleditsch, Nils Petter, et al., "Armed Conflict 1946–2001: A New Dataset," *Journal of Peace Research* 39 (5), 2002: 615–37.

Goemans, Hein, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch and Giacomo Chiozza, "Introducing Archigos: A Data Set of Political Leaders," *Journal of Peace Research* 46 (2), 2009: 269–83.

Gordon, Michael R. and Anne Barnard, "U.S. Places Militant Syrian Rebel Group on List of Terrorist Organizations," *New York Times*, 10 December, 2012.

Gould, Roger V., "Collective Violence and Group Solidarity: Evidence from Feuding Society," *American Sociological Review* 64 (3), 1999: 356–80.

Gunaratna, Rohan, *Indian Intervention in Sri Lanka: The Role of India's Intelligence Agencies* (Colombo: South Asian Network on Conflict Research, 1993).

Gunter, Michael M., *Historical Dictionary of the Kurds* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2011).

Gunter, Michael M., *The Kurdish Predicament in Iraq: A Political Analysis* (New York: St. Martin's Press 1999).

Haas, Mark L., "Ideology and Alliances: British and French External Balancing Decisions in the 1930s," *Security Studies* 12 (4), 2003: 34–79.

Habyariamana, James, et al., *Coethnicity: Diversity and the Dilemmas of Collective Action* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2009).

Habyariamana, James, et al., "Why Does Ethnic Diversity Undermine Public Goods Provision?" *American Political Science Review* 101 (4), 2007: 709–25.

Haddad, Wadi, *Lebanon: The Politics of Revolving Doors* (New York: Praeger, 1985).

Hamzeh, A. Nisar, "Lebanon's Hizbullah: From Islamic Revolution to Parliamentary Accommodation," *Third World Quarterly* 14 (2), 1993: 321–337.

Hanf, Theodor, *Coexistence in Wartime Lebanon: Decline of a State and Rise of a Nation* (London: Centre for Lebanese Studies, 1993).

Harbom, Lotta, Erik Melander and Peter Wallensteen, "Dyadic Dimensions of Armed Conflict, 1946–2007," *Journal of Peace Research* 45 (5), 2008: 697–710.

Harris, William, "The View from Zahle: Security and Economic Conditions in the Central Bekaa 1980-1985," *Middle East Journal* 39 (3), 1985: 270-286.

Hashim, Ahmed S., "The Islamic State: From al-Qaeda Affiliate to Caliphate," *Middle East Policy* 21(4), 2014: 69-83.

Hazarika, Sanjow, *Strangers of the Mist: Tales of War and Peace from India's Northeast* (New Delhi: Penguin India, 1994).

*H-Diplo/ISSF Roundtable Reviews* 6 (2), 2013.

Hellmann-Rajanayagam, Dagmar, *The Tamil Tigers: Armed Struggle for Identity* (Stuttgart, Germany: F. Steiner, 1994).

Hiltermann, Joost R., *A Poisonous Affair: America, Iraq, and the Gassing of Halabja* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

Hiro, Dilip, *The Longest War: The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

Holliday, Joseph, "Syria's Maturing Insurgency," *Middle East Security Report* 5, 2012.

Hopgood, Stephen, *Tamil Tigers, 1987-2002*, in Diego Gambetta, ed., *Making Sense of Suicide Missions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

Horne, Alistair, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954-1962* (London: Macmillan, 1977).

Horowitz, Donald L., *The Deadly Ethnic Riot* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001).

Horowitz, Donald L., *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

Horowitz, Michael C., "Nonstate Actors and the Diffusion of Innovations: The Case of Suicide Terrorism," *International Organization* 64 (1), 2010: 33-64.

International Crisis Group, "Rigged Cars and Barrel Bombs: Aleppo and the State of the Syrian War," *Middle East Report* 55, 2014a.

International Crisis Group, "Flight of Icarus? The PYD's Precarious Rise in Syria," *Middle East Report* 151, 2014b.

International Crisis Group, "Syria's Metastasising Conflicts," *Middle East Report* 143, 2013a.

International Crisis Group, "Syria's Kurds: A Struggle Within a Struggle," *Middle East Report* 136, 2013b.

International Crisis Group, "Anything But Politics: The State of Syria's Political Opposition," *Middle East Report* 146, 2013c.

International Crisis Group, "Tentative Jihad: Syria's Fundamentalist Opposition," *Middle East Report* 131, 2012.

"Interview with Mohammed Ibrahim Bahdurai," ELF, *Eritrean Newsletter* 44, 1 September, 1981 (available at [http://www.nharnet.com/Archives/Arch\\_2004/Oct\\_2004/NharnetTeam\\_Oct01.htm](http://www.nharnet.com/Archives/Arch_2004/Oct_2004/NharnetTeam_Oct01.htm), accessed on 12 July, 2014).

Iqbal, Jawaid, *The Lebanese Civil War: Issues, Actors and Outcome* (Aligarh, India: Centre for West Asian Studies, 1998).

Ismael, Tareq Y., *The Rise and Fall of the Communist Party of Iraq* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

“ISIL Says It Faces War with Nusra in Syria,” *Al Jazeera*, 8 March, 2014 (available at <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/03/isil-says-it-faces-war-with-nusra-syria-20143719484991740.html>, last accessed on June 14, 2015)

“Islamic State, Turkey and Syria’s Kurds: Murky Relations,” *The Economist*, 22 September, 2014.

Iyob, Ruth, *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence: Domination, Resistance, Nationalism, 1941-1993* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

Izady, Mehrdad R., *The Kurds: A Concise Handbook* (Washington: Taylor & Francis, 1992).

Jaber, Hala, *Hezbollah: Born with a Vengeance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

Jawad, Sa’ad, *Iraq & the Kurdish Question, 1958-1970* (London: Ithaca Press, 1981).

Jayatileka, Dayan, *The Indian intervention in Sri Lanka, 1987-1990: The North-east Provincial Council and Devolution of Power* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: International Centre for Ethnic Studies, 1999).

Jenkins, Brian Michael, “Brothers Killing Brothers: The Current Infighting Will Test al Qaeda’s Brand,” *Perspective*, RAND Corporation, 2014 (available at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE123>, last accessed on June 15, 2015).

Jentzsch, Corinna, Stathis N. Kalyvas and Livia Isabella Schubiger, “Militias in Civil War,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 2015 (forthcoming).

Jervis, Robert, “Understanding Beliefs,” *Political Psychology* 27 (5), 2006: 641-63.

Jervis, Robert, “Was the Cold War a Security Dilemma?,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 3 (1), 2001: 36–60.

Jervis, Robert, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

Jervis, Robert, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30 (2), 1978: 167-214

Jervis, Robert, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976).

Johnston, Patrick B., "Countering ISIL's Financing," Testimony presented before the House Financial Services Committee on November 13, 2014.

Johnston, Patrick B., "The Geography of Insurgent Organization and its Consequences for Civil Wars: Evidence from Liberia and Sierra Leone," *Security Studies* 17 (1), 2008: 107-37.

Johnston, Patrick B., "Negotiated Settlements and Government Strategy in Civil War: Evidence from Darfur," *Civil Wars* 9 (4), 2007: 359-77.

Kagan, Kimberly, Frederik W. Kagan and Jessica D. Lewis, "A Strategy to Defeat the Islamic State," *Middle East Security Report* 23, Institute for the Study of War, 2014.

Kahsay, Berhe, *Ethiopia: Democratization and Unity. The Role of the Tigray People's Liberation Front* (Münster, Germany: Monsenstein und Vannerdat, 2005).

Kalyvas, Stathis N. and Matthew Kocher, "How 'Free' is Free-Riding in Civil Wars? Violence, Insurgency, and the Collective Action Problem," *World Politics* 59 (2), 2007: 177-216.

Kalyvas, Stathis N., "Ethnic Defection in Civil War," *Comparative Political Studies* 41 (8), 2008: 1043-68.

Kalyvas, Stathis N., *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

Kaplan, Morgan L., "How Civilian Perceptions Affect Patterns of Violence and Competition in Multi-Party Insurgencies," 2013, article manuscript, University of Chicago.

Karadaghi, Kamran, "The Two Gulf Wars: The Kurds on the World Stage, 1979-1992," in Gérard Chaliand, ed., *People Without a Country: The Kurds and Kurdistan* (London: Zed Press, 1993).

Karam, Zeina and Bassem Mroue, "Al-Qaida Militants Capture Town in Northern Syria," *Associated Press*, 19 September, 2013 (available at <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/jihadis-capture-northern-syrian-town-near-turkey>, last accessed on June 13, 2015).

Karsh, Efraim, *The Iran-Iraq War, 1980-1988* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2002).

Kasara, Kimuli, "Tax Me If You Can: Ethnic Geography, Democracy, and the Taxation of Agriculture in Africa," *American Political Science Review* 101 (1), 2007: 159- 72.

Kaufmann, Chaim D., "Possible and Impossible Solutions to Ethnic Civil Wars," *International Security* 20 (4), 1996: 136-75;

Keller, Edmond J., *Revolutionary Ethiopia: From Empire to People's Republic* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991).

Kenny, Paul D., "Structural Integrity and Cohesion in Insurgent Organizations: Evidence from Protracted Conflicts in Ireland and Burma," *International Studies Review* 12 (4), 2010: 533-55.

Khalidi, Walid, *Conflict and Violence in Lebanon: A Confrontation in the Middle East* (Cambridge, MA: Center for International Affairs, Harvard University, 1979).

Kibreab, Gaim, *Critical Reflections on the Eritrean War of Independence* (Trenton, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 2008).

Kibreab, Gaim, "Resistance, Displacement, and Identity: The Case of Eritrean Refugees in Sudan," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 34 (2), 2000: 249-96.

Kiflu, Tadesse, *Generation: The History of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (Part II)* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1998).

Kilcullen, David, "Twenty-Eight Articles: Fundamentals of Company-Level Counterinsurgency," *Military Review*, May-June 2006: 103-8.

King, Gary and Langche Zeng, "Explaining Rare Events in International Relations," *International Organization* 55 (3), 2001: 693-715.

King, Gary, Michael Tomz and Jason Wittenberg, "Making the Most of Statistical Analyses: Improving Interpretation and Presentation," *American Journal of Political Science* 44 (2), 2000: 347-61.

King, Gary, Robert O. Keohane and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

Klarke, Kevin A., "The Phantom Menace: Omitted Variable Bias in Econometric Research," *Conflict Management and Peace Research* 22 (4), 2005: 341-52.

Kozak, Christopher, "An Army in All Corners: Assad's Campaign Strategy in Syria," *Middle East Security Report* 26, Institute for the Study of War, 2015.

Kozak, Christopher, "The Assad Regime Under Stress: Conscription and Protest among Alawite and Minority Populations in Syria," Institute for the Study of War, 15 December, 2014 (available at <http://iswsyria.blogspot.com/2014/12/the-assad-regime-under-stress.html>, last accessed on June 20, 2015).

Kramon, Eric and Daniel N. Posner, "Who Benefits from Distributive Politics? How the Outcome One Studies Affects the Answer One Gets," *Perspectives on Politics* 11 (2), 2013: 461-74.

Krause, Peter, "The Structure of Success: How the Internal Distribution of Power Drives Armed Group Behavior and National Movement Effectiveness," *International Security* 38 (3), 2014: 72-116.

Krause, Peter, "The Political Effectiveness of Non-State Violence: A Two-Level Framework to Transform a Deceptive Debate," *Security Studies* 22 (2), 2013: 259-94.

Kutschera, Chris, *Le Defi Kurde, ou, Le Reve Fou de l'Independence* (Paris: Bayard éditions 1997).

Kutschera, Chris, *Le Mouvement National Kurd* (Paris: Frammarion, 1979).

Kydd, Andrew H. and Barbara Walter, "Sabotaging the Peace: The Politics of Extremist Violence," *International Organization* 56 (2), 2002: 263-96.

Lawrence, Adria, "Triggering Nationalist Violence: Competition and Conflict in Uprisings against Colonial Rule," *International Security* 35 (2), 2010: 88–122.

Lawrence, Quil, *Invisible Nation: How The Kurds' Quest for Statehood Is Shaping Iraq and the Middle East* (New York: Walker & Company, 2008).

"Lebanon," UCDP Conflict Encyclopedia (available at <http://www.ucdp.uu.se/gpdatabase/gpcountry.php?id=92&regionSelect=10-Middle East#>, last accessed on April 25, 2015).

Le Fort, René, *Ethiopia: An Heretical Revolution?* (London: Zed Press, 1983).

Lefebvre, Jeffrey Alan, *Arms for the Horn: U.S. Security Policy in Ethiopia and Somalia, 1953-1991* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991).

Levy Jack, "Case Studies: Types, Designs, and Logics of Inference," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 25 (1), 2008: 1-18.

Lewis, Janet I., "Initiating Insurgency: Rebel Group Formation and Viability in Uganda," manuscript, Harvard University, 2012.

Liberman, Evan, "Nested Analysis as a Mixed-Method Strategy for Comparative Research," *American Political Science Review* 99 (3), 2005: 435-52.

Liberman, Nira, Michael D. Sagristano and Yaacov Trope, "The Effect of Temporal Distance on Level on Mental Construal," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 38 (6), 2002: 523–34.



Lieberman, Peter, *Does Conquest Pay? The Exploitation of Occupied Industrial Societies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

Lilja, Jannie and Lisa Hultman, "Intraethnic Dominance and Control: Violence Against CoEthnics in the Early Sri Lankan Civil War," *Security Studies* 20 (2), 2011: 171–97.

Lindsay, Jon and Austin Long, "Counterinsurgency Theory and Stabilization of Iraq's Anbar," working paper, 2009.

Loewenstein, George, Ted O'Donoghue and Matthew Rabin, "Projection Bias In Predicting Future Utility," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 118 (4), 2003: 1209-48

Loftus, Elizabeth F., *Eyewitness Testimony* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979).

Loganathan, Ketheshwaran, *Sri Lanka: Lost Opportunities, Past Attempts at Resolving Ethnic Conflict* (Colombo: Centre for Policy Research and Analysis, 1996).

Lowenthal, Richard *World Communism: The Disintegration of a Secular Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).

Lowery, David and Virginia Gray, "The Population Ecology of Gucci Gulch, or the Natural Regulation of Interest Group Numbers in the American States," *American Journal of Political Science* 39 (1), 1995: 1-29.

Lund, Aron, "Syria's al-Qaeda Wing Searches for a Strategy," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 18 September 2014 (available at <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=56673>, last accessed on June 19, 2015).

Lund, Aron, "The Political Geography of Syria's War: An Interview With Fabrice Balanche," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 15 January 2015 (available at <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=5887>, last accessed on June 20, 2015).

Lyall, Jason, "Are Coethnics More Effective Counterinsurgents? Evidence from the Second Chechen War," *American Political Science Review* 104 (1), 2010: 1-20

Lyall, Jason, Kosuke Imai and Yuki Shiraito, "Dropping a Dime: Coethnic Bias and Wartime Informing," working paper, 2013.

Lynch, Julia F., "Aligning Sampling Strategies with Analytic Goals," in Mosley, in Layna Mosley, ed., *Interview Research in Political Science* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).

Mackey, Sandra, *A Mirror of the Arab World: Lebanon in Conflict* (New York: Norton, 2008).

Mampilly, Zachariah Cherian, *Rebel Rulers: Insurgent Governance and Civilian Life During War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011).

Marcum, John H., *The Angolan Revolution: Exile Politics and Guerrilla Warfare (1962-1976)* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1978).

Markakis, John, *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

McAdam, Doug, John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald, *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

McDoom, Omar Shahbudin, "The Psychology of Threat in Intergroup Conflict: Emotions, Rationality, and Opportunity in the Rwandan Genocide," *International Security* 37 (2), 2012: 119-55.

McDowall, David, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004, 3rd ed.).

McDowall, David, *The Kurds: A Nation Denied* (London: Minority Rights Group, 1992).

McLaughlin, Theodore and Wendy Pearlman, "Out-Group Conflict, In-Group Unity? Exploring the Effect of Repression on Intramovement Cooperation," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56 (1), 2012: 41-66

McLauchlin, Theodore, "Loyalty Strategies and Military Defection in Rebellion," *Comparative Politics* 42 (3), 2010: 333-50.

Mearsheimer, John J., *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001).

Mehta, Ashok "Sri Lanka's Ethnic Conflict: How Eelam War IV was Won," *Manekshaw Paper* 22, Centre for Land Warfare Studies, CLAWS, 2010, New Delhi).

Metelits, Claire, *Inside Insurgency: Violence, Civilians, and Revolutionary Group Behavior* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).

*The Military Balance*, London: International Institute for Strategic Studies (various years).

More, Christiane, *Les Kurdes Auhjourd'hui: Mouvement National and Partis Politiques* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1984).

Mosley, Layna, "Introduction. 'Just Talk to People?' Interviews in Contemporary Political Science," in Layna Mosley, ed., *Interview Research in Political Science* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).

Mullen, Brian and Rupert Brown and Colleen Smith, "Ingroup Bias as a Function of Salience, Relevance, and Status: An Integration," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 22, 1992: 103-22.

Muni, S. D., *Pangs of Proximity: India and Sri Lanka's Ethnic Crisis* (Oslo: PRIO, 1993).

Nassief, Isabel, "Syria's Southern Battlefront," *Backgrounder*, Institute for the Study of War, 2013.

Nassief, Isabel, "The Campaign for Homs and Aleppo," *Middle East Security Report* 17, 2014.

Nassief, Isabel, "Syria's Southern Battlefront," *Backgrounder*, Institute for the Study of War, 2013.

Nawshirwan, Mustafa, *Going Around in Circles: The Inside Story of Events in Iraqi Kurdistan, 1984-1988* (Iraqi Kurdistan, 1999).

Nawshirwan, Mustafa, *Fingers that Break Each Other: Political Events in Kurdistan from 1979 to 1983* (Iraqi Kurdistan, 1998).

Nawshirwan, Mustafa, *From the Danube Shores to the Nawzang Valley: Political Events in Iraqi Kurdistan from 1975 to 1978* (Iraqi Kurdistan, 1997)

Nemeth, Stephen, "The Effect of Competition on Terrorist Group Operations," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 58 (2): 336-62.

Nisbett, Richard and Timothy D. Wilson, "Telling More Than We Can Know: Verbal Reports on Mental Processes," *Psychological Review* 84 (33), 1977: 231-59.

Norton, Augustus Richard Norton and Jillian Schwedler, "(In)security Zones in South Lebanon," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 23 (1), 1993: 61-79.

Norton, Augustus Richard, *Hezbollah: A Short History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

Norton, Augustus Richard, "Lebanon after Ta'if: Is the Civil War over?," *Middle East Journal* 45 (3), 1991: 457-473.

Norton, Augustus Richard, *Amal and the Shi'a: Struggle for the Soul of Lebanon*, Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1987.

Nygaard, Havard Mogleiv and Michael Weintraub, "Bargaining between Rebel Groups and the Outside Option of Violence," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 2015 (forthcoming).

O'Bagy, Elizabeth, "The Free Syrian Army," *Middle East Security Report* 9, Institute for the Study of War, 2013.

O'Ballance, Edgar, *Civil War in Lebanon, 1975-92* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998).

O'Ballance, Edgar, *The Kurdish Revolt: 1961-1970* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1973).

O'Duffy, Brendan, "LTTE: Majoritarianism, Self-Determination, and Military-to-Political Transition in Sri Lanka," in Marianne Heiberg, Brendan O'Leary and John Tirman, eds., *Terrorism, Insurgency, and the State: Ending Protracted Conflict* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

Ostovar, Afshon and Will McCants, "The Rebel Alliance: Why Syria's Armed Opposition Has Failed to Unify," CNA Research Memorandum, CNA Analysis & Solutions, 2013 (available at <https://www.cna.org/research/2013/rebel-alliance>, last accessed on June 10, 2015).

Ottaway, Marina, "The Ethiopian Transition: Democratization or New Authoritarianism?" *Northeast African Studies* 2 (3), 1995: 67-87.

Parkinson, Sarah Elizabeth, "Organizing Rebellion: Rethinking High-Risk Mobilization and Social Networks in War," *American Political Science Review* 107 (3), 2013: 418-32.

Pateman, Roy, *Eritrea: Even the Stones are Burning* (Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1998).

Pelletiere, Stephn C., *The Kurds: An Unstable Element in the Gulf* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1984).

Petersen, Roger, *Understanding Ethnic Violence, Western Intervention in the Balkans: The Strategic Use of Emotion in Conflict* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

Petersen, Roger D., *Resistance and Rebellion: Lessons from Eastern Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

Picard, Elizabeth, *Lebanon, a Shattered Country: Myths and Realities of the Wars in Lebanon* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 2002).

Pollack, Kenneth M., "How, When and Whether to End the War in Syria," *Washington Post*, 10 August, 2012.

Pollack, Kenneth M., *Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness, 1948-1991* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2002).

Pool, David, *From Guerrillas to Government: The Eritrean Liberation Front* (Oxford: James Currey, 2001).

Pool, David, *Eritrea: Towards Unity in Diversity* (London: Minority Rights Group, 1997).

Popkin, Samuel, *The Rational Peasant* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979).

Posen, Barry R., "The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict," *Survival* 31 (1), 1993: 27-37.

Posen, Barry R., *Sources of Military Doctrine* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984).

Posner, Daniel N., *Institutions and Ethnic Politics in Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

Powell, Robert, "War as a Commitment Problem," *International Organization* 60 (1), 2006: 169-203.

Quinlivan, James T., "Coups-Proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East," *International Security* 24 (2), 1999: 131-65.

Rabil, Robert G., *Embattled Neighbors: Syria, Israel and Lebanon* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003).

Rabinovich, Itamar, *The War for Lebanon, 1970-1985* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985).

Randal, Jonathan, *Kurdistan: After Such Knowledge, What Forgiveness?* (London: Bloomsbury, 1998).

Randal, Jonathan C., *Going All the Way: Christian Warlords, Israeli Adventurers, and the War in Lebanon* (New York: The Viking Press, 1984).

Ray, James Lee, "Constructing Multivariate Analyses (of Dangerous Dyads)," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 22 (4), 2005: 277-92.

Reno, William, *Warfare in Independent Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

Richardson, John, *Paradise Poisoned: Learning about Conflict, Terrorism and Development from Sri Lanka's Civil Wars* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: International Center for Ethnic Studies, 2005).

Riek, Blake M., et al., "Does a Common Ingroup Identity Reduce Intergroup Threat?," *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 13 (4), 2010: 403-23.

Roessler, Philip, "The Enemy Within: Personal Rule, Coups, and Civil War in Africa," *World Politics* 63 (2), 2011: 300-46.

Roggio, Bill and Lisa Lundquist, "Analysis: Shifting Dynamics of Rebel Infighting in Syria," *Long War Journal*, 17 January, 2014 (available at [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/01/analysis\\_shifting\\_dy.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/01/analysis_shifting_dy.php), last accessed on June 24, 2015).

Roggio, Bill, "Chief of Syrian Revolutionaries Front Says al Qaeda Is 'Not Our Problem'," *Long War Journal*, 3 April, 2014 (available at [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/04/chief\\_of\\_syrian\\_revolutionary.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/04/chief_of_syrian_revolutionary.php), last accessed on June 21, 2015).

Romano, David, "Conducting Research in the Middle East's Conflict Zones," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 39 (3), 2006: 439-42.

Romano, David, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Opportunity, Mobilization and Identity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

Rosato, Sebastian, "The Inscrutable Intentions of Great Powers," *International Security* 39 (3), 2014-15: 48-88.

Rosecrance, Richard, *Rise of the Trading State* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

Rosen, Stephen Peter, *Societies and Military Power: India and Its Armies* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).

Rouleau, Eric, *Le Monde*, 12 March, 1963.

Sambanis, Nicholas, "What Is Civil War? Conceptual and Empirical Complexities of an Operational Definition," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 48 (6), 2004: 814-58.

Sambanis, Nicholas, Jonah Schulhofer-Wohl and Moses Shayo, "Parochialism as a Central Challenge in Counterinsurgency," *Science* 336, 2012: 805-8.

Sarkees, Meredith Reid Sarkees and Phil Schafer, "The Correlates of War Data On War: an Update To 1997," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 18 (1), 2000: 123-44.

Scacco, Alexandra, *Anatomy of a Riot: Participation in Ethnic Violence in Nigeria*, 2012, book manuscript, New York University.

Scheepers, Daan, et al., "The Social Functions of Ingroup Bias: Creating, Confirming, or Changing Social Reality," *European Review of Social Psychology* 17 (1), 2006: 359-96.

Schelling, Thomas, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966).

Schmidt, Dana Adams, *Journey Among Brave Men* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1964).

Schroeder, Paul, "Historical Reality vs. Neo-Realist Theory," *International Security* 19 (1), 1994: 108-48.

Schulhofer-Wohl, Jonah, "Fighting Between Allies and the Civil War in Syria," in *The Political Science of Syria's War*, POMEPS Briefings 22, 2013.

Schweller, Randall, *Deadly Imbalances: Tripolarity and Hitler's Strategy of World Conquest*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).



Seawright, Jason and John Gerring, "Case Selection Techniques in Case Study Research: A Menu of Qualitative and Quantitative Options," *Political Research Quarterly* 61 (2), 2008: 294-308.

"Setback for U.S.-backed rebels in Syria," CBS News, 4 November 2014 (available at <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/al-qaeda-linked-nusra-front-fights-rebels-syria-turkey-border/>, last accessed on June 20, 2015).

Seymour, Lee, "Alignment in Civil Wars: Rivalry, Patronage and Side Switching in Sudan," *International Security* 39 (2), 2014: 92-131.

Shayo, Moses and Asaf Zussman, "Judicial Ingroup Bias in the Shadow of Terrorism," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 126, 2011: 1447-84.

Sherman, Richard, *Eritrea: The Unfinished Revolution* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1980).

Shils, Edward A. and Morris Janowitz, "Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 12 (2), 1948: 280-31.

Shinn, David H. and Thomas P. Ofcansky, *Historical Dictionary of Ethiopia* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2013).

Siklawi, Rami, "The Dynamics of the Amal Movement in Lebanon 1975-90," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 34 (1), 2012: 4-26.

Simmel, Georg, *Conflict: The Web of Group Affiliations* (Glencoe, ILL.: Free Press, 1955)

Sivarajah, Ambalavanar, *Politics of Tamil Nationalism in Sri Lanka* (New Delhi: South Asian Publishers, 1996).

Sly, Liz "On Third Anniversary of Syrian Rebellion, Assad Is Steadily Winning the War," *Washington Post*, 14 March, 2014.

Smith, Niel A., "Understanding Sri Lanka's Defeat of the Tamil Tigers," *Joint Forces Quarterly*, 59 (4), 2010: 40-4.

Snider, Lewis W., "The Lebanese Forces: Their Origins and Role in Lebanon's Politics," *Middle East Journal* 38 (1), 1984: 1-33.

Snyder, Glenn H., *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

Snyder, Jack L. and Robert Jervis, "Civil War and the Security Dilemma," in Barbara F. Walter and Jack Snyder, eds., *Civil Wars, Insecurity, and Intervention* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

Snyder, Jack L. and Keir A. Lieber, "Correspondence: Defensive Realism and the 'New' History of World War I," *International Security* 33 (1), 2008: 174-94.

Solomon, Barnabas, *State Change & Continuity in Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa: Afro-Arab Strategic Consultancy, 2012).

Solomon, Erika, "Isis Uses Humility as Tactic for Conquest," *Financial Times*, 27 July, 2014.

Staniland, Paul, "Armed Groups and Militarized Elections," *International Studies Quarterly*, 2015 (forthcoming).

Staniland, Paul, *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).

Staniland, Paul, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Insurgent Fratricide, Ethnic Defection, and the Rise of Pro-State Paramilitaries," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56 (1), 2012a: 16-40.

Staniland, Paul, "Organizing Insurgency: Networks, Resources, and Rebellion in South Asia," *International Security* 37 (1), 2012b.

Staniland, Paul, "States, Insurgents, and Wartime Political Orders," *Perspectives on Politics* 10 (2), 2012c: 243-64.

Stansfield, Gareth R. V., *Iraqi Kurdistan: Political Development and Emergent Democracy* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003).

Stedman, Stephen, "Spoiler Problems in Peace Processes," *International Security* 22 (2), 1997: 5-53.

Stein, Arthur A., "Conflict and Cohesion: A Review of the Literature," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 20 (1), 1976: 143-72.

Stork, Joe, "The War of the Camps, The War of the Hostages," *MERIP Reports* 133, 1985.

Sundberg, Ralph, Kristine Eck and Joakim Kreutz, "Introducing the UCDP Non-State Conflict Dataset," *Journal of Peace Research*, 49 (2), 2012: 351-62.

Swamy, M.R., *Inside an Elusive Mind, Prabhakaran: The First Profile of the World's Most Ruthless Guerrilla Leader* (Delhi: Konark Publishers 2003).

Swamy, M.R. Narayan, *Tigers of Lanka, From Boys to Guerrillas* (Delhi: Konark Publishers, 1994).

"Syria Crisis: Guide to Armed and Political opposition," BBC News, 13 December, 2013, (available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/worldmiddle-east-24403003>, last accessed on June 14, 2015).

"Syria: Nearly Half Rebel Fighters are Jihadists or Hardline Islamists, Says IHS Jane's Report," *The Daily Telegraph*, 15 September, 2013.

"Syrian Rebel Factions Tell Al Qaeda Groups to Withdraw," France24, 3 October, 2013 (available at <http://www.france24.com/en/20131003-syrian-rebels-tell-qaeda-groups-withdraw-homs-isil-azaz/>, last accessed on June 13, 2015).

Szybala, Valerie, "Al-Qaeda Shows Its True Colors in Syria," *Backgrounder*, Institute for the Study of War, 2013a.

Szybala, Valerie, "The Islamic Alliance Emerges," *Backgrounders*, Institute for the Study of War, 2013b.

Tajfel, Henri, *Human Groups and Social Categories* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

Talmadge, Caitilin, *Authoritarian Armies on the Battlefield: Explaining Fighting Power in Non-Democratic Regimes*, book manuscript, George Washington University, 2013.

Tambiah, Stanley, *Sri Lanka: Ethnic Fratricide and the Dismantling of Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

Tansey, Oisín, "Process Tracing and Elite Interviewing: A Case for Non-Probability Sampling," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 40 (4), 2007: 765-772.

Tareke, Gebru, *The Ethiopian Revolution: War in the Horn of Africa* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

Tareke, Gebru, "From Lash to Red Star: the Pitfalls of Counter-insurgency in Ethiopia, 1980–82," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 40 (3), 2002: 465–98

Terrill, Andrew W., "Confronting the 'Islamic State': Understanding the Strengths and Vulnerabilities of ISIS," *Parameters* 44 (3), 2014:13-23.

Tetlock, Philip E., "Social Psychology and World Politics," in Daniel Gilbert, Susan T. Fiske and Gardner Lindzey, eds., *Handbook of Social Psychology* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1998).

"The Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria: Two Arab Countries Fall Apart," *The Economist*, 14 June, 2014.

"The Near Liquidation of the (E)PLF," a collection of memoirs of splinter groups' fighters and other documents covering the years 1972 and 1973, compiled in 1993 by Aida Kidane (available at <http://www.eritrios.net/1970s.htm>, accessed on 23 June, 2014).

Tiruneh, Andargachew, *The Ethiopian Revolution, 1974-1987: A Transformation from an Aristocratic to a Totalitarian Autocracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

Tooby, John and Leda Cosmides, "The Evolution of War and its Cognitive Foundations," *Institute for Evolutionary Studies Technical Report* 88 (1), 1988.

TPLF Foreign Relations Bureau, *People's Voice*, March 1985, April-May 1985, Special Issue ("On Our Differences with the EPLF"), 1986.

Trachtenberg, Marc, *The Craft of International History: A Guide to Method* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

Traud, James, "Everyone Is Scared of ISIS," *Foreign Policy*, 4 October, 2013 (available at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/10/04/everyone-is-scared-of-isis/>, last accessed on June 24, 2015).

Trivelli, Richard M., "Divided Histories, Opportunistic Alliances: Background Notes on the Ethiopian-Eritrean War," *Africa Spectrum* 33 (3), 1998: 257-89.

University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna), *The Broken Palmyra* (Sri Lanka, 1990) (available at <http://www.uthr.org/BP/volume1/Chapter5.htm>, last accessed on January 19, 2015; UTHR(J) is a human rights organization that originated among professors in Jaffna).

Unpublished interview with Jalal Talabani, Kurdish Library Museum, Brooklyn, New York.

"U.S.-backed Syria Rebels Crumble Under al Qaeda Fire," CBS News, 3 March, 2015 (available at <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/us-backed-syria-rebel-group-hazm-defeated-al-qaeda-nusra-front/>, last accessed on June 20, 2015).

Vagts, Alfred, *Defense and Diplomacy: The Soldier and the Conduct of Foreign Relations* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1956).

Van Bruinessen, Martin, "The Kurds between Iran and Iraq," *MERIP Middle East Report* 141, 1986: 14-27.

Van de Walle, Nicolas, "Presidentialism and Clientelism in Africa's Emerging Party Systems," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 41 (2), 2003: 297–321.

Van Evera, Stephen, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).

Van Evera, Stephen, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

Van Oyen Witvliet, Charlotte, "Traumatic Intrusive Imagery as an Emotional Memory Phenomenon: A Review of Research and Explanatory Information Processing Theories," *Clinical Psychology Review* 17 (5), 1997: 509-36.

Vanly, Ismet Chériff, *Kurdistan Irakien Entité Nationale. Étude de la Révolution de 1961* (Neuchâtel: Éditions de la Baconnière, 1970).

Varshney, Ashutosh, "Nationalism, Ethnic Conflict, and Rationality," *Perspectives on Politics* 1 (1), 2003: 85–99.

Vaughan, Sarah, *Ethnicity and Power in Ethiopia*, PhD Dissertation, Edinburgh University, 2003.

Vijayasiri, Raj, "A Critical Analysis of the Sri Lankan Government's Counterinsurgency Campaign," Master Thesis, Command and Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 1999.

Walt, Stephen, *Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987).

Walter, Barbara F., "The Critical Barrier to Civil War Settlement," *International Organization* 51 (3), 1997: 335–64

Waltz, Kenneth, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

Ward, Steven R., *Immortal: A Military History of Iran and Its Armed Forces* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2009).

Weinstein, Jeremy M., *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

Weiss, Caleb, "Islamic State Advances Near Kobane," Long War Journal, 1 October 2014 (available at [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/10/islamic\\_state\\_advances\\_near\\_ko.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/10/islamic_state_advances_near_ko.php), last accessed on June 20, 2015).

Weiss, Michael and Hassan Hassan, "Why Some Secular Sunnis Support ISIS," *Business Insider*, 14 March, 2015 (available at <http://www.businessinsider.com/why-some-secular-sunnis-support-isis-2015-3>, last accessed on June 19, 2015).

Weiss, Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (New York: Regan Arts, 2015).

Weitsman, Patricia A., "Alliance Cohesion and Coalition Warfare: The Central Powers and Triple Entente," *Security Studies* 12 (3), 2003: 79-113.

Weldemichael, Awet T., "Formative Alliances of Northeast African Insurgents: Eritrean Liberation Strategy and Ethiopian Armed Opposition, 1970s–1990s," *Northeast African Studies* 14 (1), 2014: 83-122.

Weldemichael, Awet T., *Third World Colonialism and Strategies of Liberation: Eritrea and East Timor Compared* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013a).

Weldemichael, Awet T., "African Diplomacy of Liberation: The Case of Eritrea's Search for An 'African India'," *Cahiers d'Études africaines* 212 (4), 2013b: 867-94

Weldemichael, Awet T., "The Eritrean Long March: The Strategic Withdrawal of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), 1978-1979," *Journal of Military History* 73 (4), 2009: 1231-71.

Wendt, Alexander, *Social Theory of International Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

Wells, Gary L. and Elizabeth A. Olson; “Eyewitness Testimony,” *Annual Review of Psychology* 54: 2003: 277–95.

Westad, Odd Arne, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

“What ISIS, an al-Qaeda Affiliate in Syria, Really Wants,” *The Economist Explains* (blog), January 20, 2014 (available at <http://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2014/01/economist-explains-12>, last accessed on June 14, 2015).

Whetten, Laurence L., “The Military Dimension,” in P. Edward Haley and Lewis W. Snider, eds., *Lebanon in Crisis: Participants and Issues* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1979).

Whitaker, Mark P., *Learning Politics from Sivaram: The Life and Death of a Revolutionary Tamil Journalist in Sri Lanka* (London: Pluto Press, 2007).

White, Jeffrey and Oula Abdulhamid Alrifai, “Growing Rebel Capabilities Press the Syrian Regime,” *Policywatch* 2414, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2015.

White, Jeffrey, “ISIS, Iraq, and the War in Syria: Military Outlook,” *Policywatch* 2273, 2014.

White, Jeffery, “The Military Opposition on the Ground,” in Jeffrey White, Andrew J. Tabler and Aaron Y. Zelin, “Syria’s Military Opposition: How Effective, United, or Extremist?,” *Policy Focus* 128, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2013.

White, Jeffrey, Andrew J. Tabler and Aaron Y. Zelin, “Syria’s Military Opposition: How Effective, United, or Extremist?,” *Policy Focus* 128, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2013.

“Why ISIS Is Gaining Ground – and So Hard to Beat” (interview with Noah Bonsey), *Syria Deeply* (available at <http://www.syriadeeply.org/articles/2014/10/6227/isis-gaining-ground-hard-beat/>, last accessed on June 18, 2015).



Wickham-Crowley, Timothy, *Guerillas and Revolution in Latin America: A Comparative Study of Insurgents and Regimes since 1956* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

Wilson, Michael L., Marc D. Hauser and Richard W. Wrangham, "Does Participation in Intergroup Conflict Depend on Numerical Assessment, Range Location, or Rank for Wild Chimpanzees?" *Animal Behaviour* 61 (6), 2001: 1203–16.

Wilson, Timothy D. and Elizabeth W. Dunn, "Self-knowledge: Its Limits, Value, and Potential for Improvement," *Annual Review of Psychology* 55, 2004: 493-518.

Windrem, Robert, "ISIS By the Numbers: Foreign Fighter Total Keeps Growing," NBC News, 28 February, 2015 (available at <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-terror/isis-numbers-foreign-fighter-total-keeps-growing-n314731>, last accessed on June 17, 2015).

Winslow, Charles, *Lebanon: War and Politics in a Fragmented Society* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

Woldemariam, Michael, "Battlefield Outcomes and Rebel Cohesion: Lessons From the Eritrean," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 2015 (forthcoming).

Woldemariam, Michael H., *Why Rebels Collide: Factionalism and Fragmentation in African Insurgencies*, PhD Dissertation, Princeton University, 2011.

Wolfers, Arnold, *Discord and Collaboration: Essays on International Politics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1962).

Wolford, Scott, Dan Reiter and Clifford J. Carrubba, "Information, Commitment, and War," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 55 (4), 2011: 556-79.

Wood, Elisabeth J., *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

Woods, Kevin M., David D. Palkki and Mark E. Stout, eds., *The Saddam Tapes: The Inner Workings of a Tyrant Regime, 1978-2001* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

Woods, Kevin M, et al., *Saddam's Generals: Perspectives of the Iran-Iraq War* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Defense Analysis, 2011).

Woods, Kevin M., Williamson Murray and Thomas Holaday, "Saddam's War: An Iraqi Military Perspective of the Iran-Iraq War," *McNair Paper* 70, National Defense University, 2009.

Wucherpfennig Julian, et al., "Ethnicity, the State, and the Duration of Civil War," *World Politics* 64 (1), 2012: 79-115.

Yamagishi, Toshio, Nobuhito Jin and Toko Kiyonari, "Bounded Generalized Reciprocity: Ingroup Boasting and Ingroup Favoritism," *Advances in Group Processes* 17, 1999: 161-97.

Yeginsu, Ceylan, "ISIS Draws a Steady Stream of Recruits From Turkey," *New York Times*, 15 September, 2014.

Young, John, *Peasant Revolution in Ethiopia: The Tigray People's Liberation Front, 1975-1991* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

Young, John, "Ethnicity and Power in Ethiopia," *Review of African Political Economy* 23 (70), 1996a: 531-42.

Young, John, "The Tigray and Eritrean Peoples Liberation Fronts: A History of Tensions and Pragmatism," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 34 (1), 1996b: 105-20.

Zahriyeh, Ehab, "How ISIL Became a Major Force with Only a Few Thousand Fighters," *Al Jazeera*, 19 June, 2014, available at <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/6/19/isil-thousands-fighters.html>, last accessed on June 17, 2015).

Zelin, Aaron Y., "The War between ISIS and al-Qaeda for Supremacy of the Global Jihadist Movement," *Research Notes*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2014.

## **Appendix 1: Interviewee List**

### **Iraqi Kurdistan (22 subjects, 31 interviews total)**

- Abdulrazaq Aziz – 1 interview in Sulaimania, Iraq. He was member of the Ahmed-Talabani faction from 1960, then PUK's high-ranking member.
  
- Adil Murad – 2 interviews in Sulaimania, Iraq. He was a member of Barzani's faction during the first Kurdish insurgency and then a founding member of the PUK.
  
- Adnan Mufti – 1 interview in Erbil, Iraq. He was a senior member of the Socialist Party at the time of its insurgency against Iraq.
  
- Azoz Hardi – 1 interview in Sulaimania, Iraq. He was a member of Pasok from 1981, for which he fought as a peshmerga from 1987 to 1991.
  
- Farid Assasard – 1 interview in Sulaimania, Iraq. He was responsible for PUK's communications from 1978.
  
- Faridoun Abd-Al Qader – 2 interviews in Sulaimania, Iraq. He was a PUK's founding member.
  
- Fouad Yassin – 2 interviews in Sulaimania, Iraq. He was a KDP's peshmerga until 1975 and then a PUK's foot soldier in the years 1976-1978.
  
- Kurshid Shera – 2 interviews in Erbil, Iraq. He was a peshmerga in Barzani's faction from 1961 and then a KDP's military commander.
  
- Mahmoud Osman (Dr.) – 1 interview in Erbil, Iraq. He was Mullah Mustafa Barzani's close collaborator from the early 1960s.
  
- Mala Baxtiar – 1 interview in Sulaimania, Iraq. He was an early PUK's military commander.
  
- Mala Mohamed – 2 interviews in Salahadin, Iraq. He has been a KDP's member since before the beginning of the war in 1961.

- Mam Rostam – 1 interview in Sulaimania, Iraq. He was a PUK’s military commander.
  
- Mohammad “Hama” Tofiq – 1 interview in Sulaimania, Iraq. He was an early high-ranking member of the PUK.
  
- Mulazin Omar – 1 interview in Sulaimania, Iraq. He was an early PUK’s military commander.
  
- Mushin Dizai – 1 meeting in Erbil, Iraq. He was a close advisor to Mullah Mustafa Barzani and then a senior KDP’s figure.
  
- Mustafa Chawrash – 1 meeting in Sulaimania, Iraq. He has been a PUK’s senior military leader.
  
- Mustafa Seydcadre – 1 meeting in Sulaimania, Iraq. He was a senior PUK’s member.
  
- Omar Said Ali – 2 interviews in Sulaimania, Iraq. He was a senior PUK’s member.
  
- Salar Aziz – 2 interviews in Sulaimania, Iraq. He was a member of the Ahmed-Talabani faction and then high-ranking PUK’s member.
  
- Shores Hadji – 1 interview in Sulaimania, Iraq. He was a PUK’s commander during the Iran-Iraq war.
  
- Seyd Kaka – 2 interviews in Erbil, Iraq. He was a military commander in Barzani’s faction, then in the PUK and the Socialist Party.
  
- Shaik Jafar – 2 interviews in Erbil, Iraq. He was a PUK’s military commander and KRG’s Minister for Peshmerga Affairs at the time of the interview.

## **Eritrea (12 subjects, 17 interviews total)**

- Adhanom Gebremariam – 2 interviews in New York City. He was an EPLF's member from 1972, held senior military command positions during the war as well as executive and diplomatic posts in its aftermath.
  
- Ahmed Nasser – 1 interview in Stockholm. He was member of the ELF from 1963, held in leadership positions from 1971, including the chairmanship of the organization from 1975 to 1983.
  
- Asmeron Menghsteab – 1 interview in Frankfurt. ELF's member from 1974, senior cadre subsequently.
  
- Gherezgheher Tewelde, 1 interview via Skype. He was an ELF's member from 1965, senior cadre subsequently.
  
- Gime Ahmed – 2 interviews Addis Ababa. He was an early ELM's member, in the ELF from 1962, held several leadership and military positions, including in the counterintelligence office.
  
- Haile Menkerios – 1 interview in Addis Ababa. He was EPLF's member from 1973, Eritrea's Ambassador to Ethiopia and to the Organization of African Unity and United Nations Ambassador at the African Union after Eritrea's independence.
  
- Mesfin Hagos – 3 interviews in Frankfurt. He was a founding member of the EPLF, military commander during the liberation struggle and Eritrea's Minister of Defense after independence.
  
- Tesfay Woldemichael "Degiga" – 1 interview in Frankfurt. He was an ELF's member from 1973 and in the group's leadership from 1975.
  
- Tewolde Gebrselassie – 2 interviews in Addis Ababa. He was an ELF's member from 1974, senior cadre subsequently.
  
- Wolde-Yesus Ammar – 1 interview in Frankfurt. He was a member of an ELF's underground cell from 1965, subsequently became the head of the ELF's Foreign Office.
  
- Yusuf Berhanu (Dr.) – 1 interview in Addis Ababa. He was in the ELF's leadership positions from 1975.

- anonymous interviewee, 1 interview in Addis Ababa. He was an ELF's member from 1974, senior cadre subsequently.

**Tigray (16 subjects, 18 interviews total)**

- Aregawi Berhe – 1 interview in The Hague. He was a founding member of the TPLF, then chairman of the organization in the years 1976-1979 and head of its military committee until his ousting in 1986.

- Begasho Gurmo “Ashenafi” – 1 interview in Frankfurt, Germany. He was an EPRP's foot soldier in Tigray from 1977.

- Berhanu Berhe – 1 interview in Mekele, Ethiopia. He was a TPLF's rank-and-file from 1977.

- Fantahun “Ghidey” Zeratsion – 1 interview in Oslo. He was a founding member of the TPLF, then vice-chairman from 1978 until his expulsion from the organization in 1985

- Gebreab Barnabas (Dr.) – 1 interview in Addis Ababa. He has been a TPLF's member since 1983.

- Gebru Asrat – 1 interview in Addis Ababa. He was a TPLF's member from 1975 and a key figure in the organization during the insurgency, then politburo member and President of Tigray at the time of his expulsion in 2001.

- Mokonnen Mokonnen – 1 interview in Silver Spring, MD. He was a TPLF's member from 1975, then a senior figure in the organization until 1988.

- Mulugeta Gebrehiwot – 1 in Addis Ababa. He was an early TPLF's member, a simple rank-and-file at the time of the TPLF's fights with other groups in Tigray, then he occupied more senior positions.

- Negasso Gidada – 1 interview in Addis Ababa. He was originally affiliated with the OLF, then joined the OPDM in 1991; he served as President of Ethiopia from 1995 to 2001.

-Nigatu Teferi – 1 interview in Lancaster, PA. He was a major in the Ethiopian Army until 1991 and took part in the Lash and the Red Star offensives.

- Sibhat Nega – 2 interviews in Addis Ababa. He has been in the TPLF's leadership since 1975.

- Tedros Hagos – 1 interview in Mekele, Ethiopia. He was a TPLF's member from 1976, then member of the group's leadership committee from 1983.

- Tekleweini Assefa – 1 interview in Addis Ababa. He was an early TPLF's member, then senior member of the organization and head of the TPLF's Relief Society of Tigray (REST) during the war.

- Tesfay Atsbeha – 1 interview in Cologne, Germany. He was a TPLF's military commander from 1976.

- Yosef Tesfai – 1 interview in Addis Ababa. He was an EPRP's member based in the United States during the war.

- anonymous interviewee – 2 interviews in Addis Ababa. He was an EPRP's rank-and-file in Tigray.

## Appendix 2: Robustness Checks for Statistical Analysis

In this appendix, I present a series of additional robustness checks of the statistical findings presented in Chapter 6 on the coethnicity hypothesis. As a preview, *coethnic* appears robust to the inclusion of several alternative measures of my control variables and different specifications.

### *Robustness checks with alternative measures of government threat and strength*

In Table A2.1, I run the models presented in Table 6.2 in Chapter 6 with *gdp* replacing military personnel as a measure of *government strength*. The new variable is drawn from the dataset compiled by Seden Akcinaroglu and indicates a civil war country's GDP per capita (in 2005 constant prices, divided by 1000).<sup>702</sup> I also run models with two alternative measures of the degree of overstretch of government forces. In addition to estimates of rebel groups' numerical strength (whose annual sum across all dyads facing the same government I use to create *overstretch*), the Non-state Actor Data reports a qualitative assessment of organizations' "fighting capacity" and "summary strength" relative to the government. Fighting capacity is an ordinal variable indicating "the ability of the rebels to effectively engage the army militarily and win major battles, posing a credible challenge to the state," rather than limiting themselves to hit-and-run attacks; it ranges from "low" to "moderate" and "high".<sup>703</sup> The measure of summary strength is an ordinal variable indicating whether an insurgent group is "much weaker,"

---

<sup>702</sup> Seden Akcinaroglu, "Rebel Interdependencies and Civil War Outcomes," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56 (5), 2012: 879-903.

<sup>703</sup> David E. Cunningham, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch and Idean Salehyan. "It Takes Two: A Dyadic Analysis of Civil War Duration and Outcome," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 53 (4), 2009: 570-97, in particular pp. 580-1.



“weaker,” “stronger,” “much stronger” than the government or “at parity” with it.<sup>704</sup> I construct *overstretch3* and *overstretch2* by transforming both of these nominal variables into numerical ones (with respective ranges of 1-3 and 1-5) and summing them across all rebel groups facing the same government in a given year.

**Table A2.1: Robustness to alternative measures of government strength and threat**

Model	(A1)	(A2)	(A3)	(A4)	(A5)	(A6)
Coethnic	2.304*** (2.70)	2.444** (2.34)	1.997*** (2.79)	1.724*** (2.62)	2.267*** (2.62)	1.958** (2.48)
Gdp	0.013 (0.41)	0.043 (1.25)			0.010 (0.32)	0.006 (0.21)
Abs. weakness	-0.471 (-0.45)	0.052 (0.07)	-1.012 (-1.26)	-1.219 (-1.51)	-0.476 (-0.51)	-0.652 (-0.70)
Balance	-0.818 (-1.27)	-0.485 (-1.02)	-1.342** (-2.29)	-1.466** (-2.33)	-0.817 (-1.27)	-0.863 (-1.43)
Overstretch		0.00002*** (3.71)				
Overstretch2			-0.076 (-0.34)		-0.013 (-0.05)	
Overstretch3				-0.229 (-1.15)		-0.179 (-0.90)
Constant	-4.530*** (-3.34)	-6.039*** (-5.89)	-3.389** (-2.46)	-2.478** (-2.21)	-4.367*** (-3.00)	-3.272*** (-2.83)
Observations	973	973	1050	1050	973	973

Note: Rare-event logit with robust standard errors (Z values in parentheses)

\* significant at .1; \*\* significant at .05; \*\*\* significant at .01.

The inclusion of these new variables does not affect my main findings, with *coethnic*'s significance ranging between the 0.05 and 0.01 levels. *Gdp* and the two alternative measures of government overstretch are not significant.

<sup>704</sup> Cunningham, Gleditsch and Salehyan (2009) collapse these two variables in, respectively, a dichotomous and trichotomous variable in their paper, but I use the original variables in the Non-state Actor Data to create the two alternative measures of government forces' overstretch

In table A2.2 I introduce the variable counting the number of rebel groups a government is facing in a given year (*rebel groups*) in models with different specifications (in Chapter 6, I had included this variable in model 6 in Table 6.3 and then dropped it for lack of statistical significance). *Rebel groups* is significant in 3 out of 5 models, but has an unexpected negative sign, which suggests that the variable is probably not capturing the degree of overstretch of the security forces; my favorite measure – *overstretch* – retains statistical significance and its positive sign in the models in which it is included. The coethnicity effect is robust to these checks.

**Table A2.2: Robustness checks with number of rebel groups**

Model	(A7)	(A8)	(A9)	(A10)	(A11)
Coethnic	1.662*** (2.71)	1.770*** (2.60)	1.586** (2.29)	1.987** (2.29)	2.101** (2.49)
Rebel groups	-0.574** (-2.25)	-0.473** (-2.23)	-0.266 (-0.89)	-0.654* (-1.66)	-0.579 (-1.29)
Absolute weakness	-1.245 (-1.42)	-0.711 (-0.67)	-0.763 (-0.68)	-0.128 (-0.18)	-0.145 (-0.19)
Balance	-1.441** (-2.10)	-0.793 (-1.10)	-0.867 (-1.21)	-0.466 (-0.90)	-0.583 (-1.06)
Gdp		0.013 (0.44)		0.05* (1.85)	
Military personnel			-0.001 (-0.71)		-0.001 (-0.82)
Overstretch				0.00002*** (3.89)	0.00002*** (3.63)
Constant	-1.314 (-1.11)	-2.169* (-1.66)	-2.376** (-1.96)	-3.18** (-2.08)	-2.874* (-1.78)
Observations	1050	973	970	973	970

*Note:* Rare-event logit with robust standard errors (Z values in parentheses).

\* significant at .1; \*\* significant at .05; \*\*\* significant at .01.

***Robustness checks with alternative measures of the inter-rebel balance of power***

In tables A2.3 and A2.4 I run a series of models with alternative measures of the distribution of power among members of rebel dyads; *coethnic* retains statistical significance in all specifications, ranging from the 0.1 to the 0.05 level. In model A12, I include *preponderance*, a dummy indicating a 2-1 numerical advantage for one of the groups in the dyads, instead of the *balance* and *absolute weakness* dummies included in the main models. In model A13, I replace the new variable with *preponderance2*, indicating a 1.5-1 numerical advantage. Neither variable approaches statistical significance. Models A14 and A15 are identical to the previous two, with the exception that *gdp* replaces *military personnel* as a measure of government strength; the measures of preponderance are still not significant.

In models A16-18, I include the dummies *absolute weakness* and *balance2*, which is created based on the threshold of intra-dyad numerical advantage (1.5-1) used for *preponderance2*. Unlike *balance*, which is significant in two specifications, *balance2* is never significant.

**Table A2.3: Robustness to alternative measures of the inter-rebel balance of power (I)**

Model	(A12)	(A13)	(A14)	(A15)	(A16)	(A17)	(A18)
Coethnic	1.4* (1.83)	1.4* (1.80)	2.3** (2.48)	2.2** (2.41)	1.4** (2.02)	2.1** (2.55)	2.2*** (2.86)
Mil. Per.	-0.002* (-1.83)	-0.002* (-1.85)			-0.002* (-1.88)		
Preponderance	0.2 (0.37)		0.4 (0.77)				
Preponderance2		-0.1 (-0.30)		-0.001 (-0.00)			
Gdp			0.01 (0.39)	0.02 (0.57)		0.02 (0.56)	
Absol. weak.					-0.3 (-0.26)	0.1 (0.09)	-0.3 (-0.41)
Balance2					-0.1 (-0.20)	0.02 (0.03)	-0.5 (-0.89)
Overstretch2							0.00001** (2.20)
Constant	-3.9*** (-4.78)	-3.6*** (-4.38)	-5.3*** (-4.74)	-5.1*** (-4.33)	-3.5*** (-2.93)	-5.0*** (-3.65)	-5.2*** (-4.46)
Observations	970	970	973	973	970	973	1050

Note: Rare-event logit with robust standard errors (Z values in parentheses)

\* significant at .1; \*\* significant at .05; \*\*\* significant at .01.

Models A19-21 in Table A2.4 report robustness checks using *asymmetric central control* as an additional alternative measure of the inter-rebel balance of power. The Non-State Actor Data contains information about the strength of rebel groups' central leadership, which is coded as either "high", "moderate" or "low". The newly created variable *asymmetric central control* is a dummy indicating whether the members of a dyad have the same level of central leadership's strength. The variable does not approach statistical significance, while *coethnic* remains significant at the 0.1 and 0.05 levels.

**Table A2.4: Robustness to alternative measures of the inter-rebel balance of power (II)**

Model	(A19)	(A20)	(A21)
Coethnic	1.143* (1.84)	1.589** (2.15)	1.834** (2.36)
Overstretch	0.00001*** (2.65)	0.00002*** (3.43)	0.00002*** (3.79)
Asymmetric central control	0.022 (0.04)	0.543 (0.76)	0.160 (0.23)
Military personnel	-0.004*** (-2.80)		
Gdp		0.023 (0.87)	
Constant	-4.575*** (-5.97)	-4.362*** (-4.48)	-5.464*** (-5.23)

Observations 902 823 824

Note: Rare-event logit with robust standard errors (Z values in parentheses)

\* significant at .1; \*\* significant at .05; \*\*\* significant at .01.

### ***Robustness checks with alternative measures of external support.***

In table A2.5 I report a series of robustness checks with four alternative measures of external support. *External support2* is a dummy variable taking on 1 if *both* members of a rebel dyad are coded as receiving explicit external support from a foreign state in the Non-State Actor Data (*external support*, which I use in the main models, is equals 1 if *at least one* of the two groups received explicit external support). *External support3* is a dummy indicating whether both members of a dyad received support, regardless of whether is coded as “explicit” or “alleged” in the Non-State Actor Data. *External support4* is a dummy indicating whether at least one of the rebel groups in a dyad received external support, regardless of whether it was explicit or alleged. Finally, the *military support* dummy takes on 1 if the Non-state Actor Data codes the external support to at least one member of the dyad as either military aid or foreign troop presence.

The coethnicity variable remains significant in all specifications. Among the alternative measures of foreign involvement on the rebel side, *external support3* and *external support4* enter the models with positive sign and are significant at the 0.1 level. The measure of the overstretch of security forces is not very robust to the inclusion of the alternative measures of external support, reaching statistical significance (at the 0.1 level) only in two out of four models.

**Table A2.5: Robustness to alternative measures of external support**

Model	(A22)	(A23)	(A24)	(A25)
Coethnic	2.122*** (2.63)	2.394** (2.27)	2.228*** (2.60)	2.508*** (3.55)
Overstretch	0.00001* (1.76)	-0.000 (-0.38)	0.000 (1.61)	0.00001* (1.82)
Absolute weakness	-0.700 (-0.78)	-0.553 (-0.44)	-0.556 (-0.61)	-0.578 (-0.63)
Balance	-1.286 (-1.63)	-1.406 (-1.09)	-1.055 (-1.32)	-1.138 (-1.54)
External support2	0.902 (1.05)			
External support3		1.379* (1.72)		
External support4			1.563* (1.89)	
Military support				0.526 (0.68)
Constant	-4.849*** (-4.42)	-4.878*** (-3.08)	-5.653*** (-4.57)	-5.214*** (-4.15)
Observations	1046	1002	1046	1046

Note: Rare-event logit with robust standard errors (Z values in parentheses)

\* significant at .1; \*\* significant at .05; \*\*\* significant at .01.

***Robustness checks with alternative measures of territorial control and hegemonic civil war***

Table A2.6 reports two additional sets of robustness checks. Models A26 and A27 introduce two alternative measures of rebel territorial control. *Territorial control2* is a dummy indicating whether *both* groups in a dyad control territory (*territorial control*, which I used in my main analysis in Chapter 6, measures whether *at least one* member of a dyad controls territory); *territorial control3* measures asymmetry in territorial control, i.e., it takes on 1 only if one group controls territory and the other one does not. Neither variable is statistically significant while *coethnic* retains its significance.

Models A28-31 include an alternative measure of the dummy for hegemonic civil war – *hegemonic2* – with various specifications. The new variable differs from *hegemonic* just for three observations involving Russia/Soviet Union, which Fotini Christia does not include in her list of multiparty civil wars and thus are coded as missing; for these observations *hegemonic2* takes the value of 1 as the overwhelming numerical superiority of Russian/Soviet forces makes the cases hegemonic by Christia’s operationalization criteria.<sup>705</sup> The new variable does not approach statistical significance; once again, *coethnic* remains significant.

---

<sup>705</sup> Fotini Christia, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

**Table A2.6: Robustness to alternative measures of territorial control and hegemonic war**

Model	(A26)	(A27)	(A28)	(A29)	(A30)	(A31)
Coethnic	2.360*** (3.01)	2.448*** (3.10)			1.285* (1.82)	2.279*** (3.03)
Overstretch	0.00001** (2.37)	0.00001** (2.37)				0.00001* (1.95)
Absolute weakness	-0.905 (-1.07)	-1.059 (-1.12)				-0.978 (-1.06)
Balance	-1.313** (-2.18)	-1.379** (-2.45)				-1.425** (-2.31)
Territorial control2	-0.399 (-0.39)					
Territorial control3		0.886 (1.20)				
Hegemonic2			-0.341 (-0.36)	0.280 (0.37)	-0.265 (-0.31)	-0.424 (-0.43)
Anocracy				1.639* (1.92)		
Constant	-4.649*** (-4.09)	-4.974*** (-4.49)	-3.756*** (-5.96)	-4.647*** (-5.22)	-4.095*** (-5.03)	-4.187*** (-2.88)
Observations	1050	1050	1092	1092	1092	981

Note: Rare-event logit with robust standard errors (Z values in parentheses)

\* significant at .1; \*\* significant at .05; \*\*\* significant at .01.